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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE

September 30, 1891.

No. 675.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LII.



"FREE FOR ALL, AND GO AS YOU PLEASE!" CRIED THE RECKLESS SPORT FROM SUNRISE, AS, HALF SITTING ON THE EDGE OF THE FARO-TABLE, HE SCATTERED HIS MONEY.

OR, The Blind Deal at Break-neck.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE GRIP-SACK SHARP" NOVELS,
"OLD '49," "SOLEMN SAUL," "THREE-
FINGERED JACK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. OVER THE CLIFF.

"STEADY, boy! What's the matter with you?"

Up to that instant Steel Surry had been riding along carelessly enough, though the trail was perilous enough to justify even a mountaineer born and bred in keeping on the keen alert to guard against broken limbs or a dislocated neck through trip or stumble. In that remote section far from the steel way of the steam-horse, even the regularly laid-out stage-roads were rough and difficult enough, in all conscience, but this—only by stretching the truth could it be called a trail.

There was only one thing to be said in its

favor—that one daring its natural perils might thereby save many a mile of rough travel in making Break-neck City, coming from the northern mining-camps.

For that reason Steel Surry had taken the "short cut over the range," little dreaming what strange adventures were to befall him ere his foot was again to press Break-neck soil.

The trail wound here and there, up and down, now skirting a shadowy abyss, then hugging the base of a rocky crag whose virgin sides could bid defiance to even the mountain goat. All was so wild, so different yet so similar, that a stranger must have lost himself right speedily, while one to the manner born would act wisely in keeping all his wits awake, lest he offer yet another testimonial to the truth of the old adage anent "the longest way 'round."

The fear of going astray had, however, troubled Steel Surry little, for when he hired the horse whose abrupt start and lacking had so unceremoniously broken in upon his day-dream just now, its owner, Bob Majors, had added the guarantee:

"You can't miss the road ef ye try it, 'thout ye kill the critter fu'st. Ef he don't take ye the round trip 'thout hitch or boggle, I won't charge ye a red, an'll throw Dandy Doc in fer good measure!"

As this was not his first trip by several, Sir Steel was fairly familiar with the "short cut," and after testing the skill and memory of Dandy Doc on his way over to Gopher Slope, he gave that intelligent creature his own way on the road back, sinking into a deep reverie of bygone days, which was only broken by that startled snort and sudden backing of his mount.

A strong hand tightened the reins, and armed heels pricked flanks as a counter-irritant, while a pair of keen gray eyes flashed a look ahead in the direction indicated by those prick-ears.

Only one glance was needed, and there was a touch of scorn in his voice as Steel Surry muttered:

"Easy, boy! Did you never see a cat before?"

With a half-snarl, half-roar, a mountain lion had sprung into full view upon a spur of rock which almost overhung the trail. Its quickly-lashing tail, its ears laid back, its bared fangs, all betokened fierce rage, and no second look was necessary to convince Sir Steel that the huge cat was already straining its sinews for a death-leap upon an enemy, human or otherwise. Just which, he could only guess, for the animal was headed away from him, and seemed ignorant of his proximity.

His lips parted to utter a shout of warning, but before a word could issue, a loud report rung forth, and rearing on its hind legs, the sorely stricken animal sprung into the air, to turn end for end as its muscular limbs wildly quivered, giving a horrible screech as it shot downward, almost upon the terrified horse.

The arm of a Samson could not have held a horse steady under such a test, and Steel Surry hardly made the effort. It seemed as though that writhing mass of fur and fury was shooting directly upon them, and rider shrunk back, even as horse wheeled in blind terror—to trip and fall on that narrow trail, giving vent to another wild snort as it found itself slipping over the verge!

Just here the trail wound along a narrow ledge of rock; so narrow that, without leaning far from the perpendicular, a rider could catch a glimpse of the ragged rocks nearly five score feet below, a fall upon which would mean instant annihilation.

A man's brain works with wondrous rapidity under such circumstances, and Steel Surry saw that he would be in great luck did he save his own life, without attempting to aid his poor horse.

He tried to kick his feet clear of the stirrups as his mount fell, but he was only partly successful, and as he flung out his hands to save his head, a vicious pluck at his foot jerked him fairly to the escarpment, over which his doomed horse went plunging with another frightful scream.

Blinded, half-stunned by the force of his fall, Surry gripped at the rocky trail, and though he found no protuberance sufficient to afford him anything like a fair hold, he still managed to check his fall in some degree.

Not entirely. He felt his legs drop over the edge of the cliff, and as the strain came upon his arms they seemed to weigh a ton!

With a horrible jerk they dragged his hands over the too-smooth surface, until he hung for a brief space with only his eyes above the level. Then—even that frail hold proved treacherous: a flake of stone crumbled beneath his fingers, and as he slipped still further, to catch with one hand at the very edge of the ledge, a hoarse cry of despair broke from his laboring lungs.

There was no time for more. Already poor Dandy Doc had met his fate on the jagged rocks with which the bottom of that narrow canyon was so thickly strewn, and with but respite sufficient for that one involuntary cry, its master fell!

Hoarse, choking though that cry was, it reached the ears of the man to whom, though so unwittingly, this tragedy was due, and dropping

the heavy rifle with which he had sounded the death-note of the mountain lion, he sprung forward with a sharp cry:

"Master! master!"

"Uncle Sam! What is it? Why did you—who shot?"

"You were sleeping, or dreaming, and a lion was about leaping upon you when I shot, but—you heard that cry?"

"A cry?" at the same time brushing one bony hand across his troubled eyes.

"A cry, yes. I fear me there was mischief done over yonder, and I must go see what it all means."

"Stop! It's another trick of those devils who have hunted me so long and so pitilessly! Stop, Sam, or—"

"'Twas no trick, master," came the answer as the gigantic black dashed past the gaunt, weird-looking figure. "I must go, for—"

A clatter of loosened rock drowned his words, but through the cloud of dust the negro pressed, then was lost to view of his master as he rounded the crag on which the mountain lion had been perched.

Almost immediately Uncle Sam caught sight of a felt hat lying on the trail, and with that as a guide, he quickly gained a point from whence he could look down the cliff, over which horse and rider had fallen but a few seconds before.

And then a short, sharp cry parted his lips, for he saw a human being hanging against the face of the rock-wall, head downward, one foot caught in a narrow crack, supporting his unconscious weight!

"Careful, boy! those devils would sell their very souls to trap us!" shrilly cried the white man, coming into view of the black.

"'Tis no trick, master," with a brief glance over his shoulder, then shifting his position for a fairer view of that suspended shape. "I fear me 'tis—death!"

With an agility which belied his snowy hair and flowing beard, the white man scrambled over the rocks until he gained the narrow trail. He took one glance at that shape, then drew back with a half-shudder.

"Dead, almost surely! And yet—there's far worse fates, boy! He might be forced to live—like me!"

"If not dead, he soon will be, hanging like that!" exclaimed the black giant, springing to his feet and facing the rocks across which he had so recently passed. "'Twas my doing—see!" pointing to where the dying lion had left great blotches of blood before rolling off the ledge to the abyss.

Without waiting for an answer, he sprung up the rocks, hurrying to where a patient, sleepy-eyed burro was standing with a pack lashed to its back. With swift fingers the negro removed this rope, small in size, but strong and thoroughly tested, then raced back with it coiling in his hands.

His master had drawn back from the escarpment, and was standing against the rock-wall, pistols in hand, his eyes vigilantly roving from side to side as though anticipating an onset of deadly enemies.

"The trail is clear, master, for I looked as I came across," said the black, in soothing tones, but with no show of surprise at such extraordinary precautions. "Will you help me save yon poor fellow, or must I try it alone?"

"If I thought he was one of that demon's imps!"

"There is only one way to make sure, master," said the black, taking a quick look at that motionless figure, then preparing his rope for use. "Saving now, will not hinder our punishing later."

He quickly knotted one end of the rope around a point of rock which withstood his severest test, then dropped the free end over the edge of the cliff, where it dangled close to Steel Surry, its length ample for all purposes.

Without asking further help from the wild-looking creature whom he called master, the black giant grasped the rope and fearlessly slipped over the escarpment, lessening the strain upon the rope by using his toes at each crack or flinty knob. Though so massive in build, he seemed supple and active as a cat, and it took but a few seconds to carry him to a point on a level with the unfortunate traveler.

Gaining a support for his feet in a crack similar to that which had cut short the fall of Steel Surry, Uncle Sam took a double turn of the rope around his left arm, near the shoulder, thus perfecting his balance, and at the same time giving him the full use of both hands.

Without losing precious time in examining the body to ascertain whether or no life lingered therein, the negro knotted the rope carefully about Sir Steel's body, close to the armpits, then climbed to the ledge above, feeling pretty sure that the foot would slip from that crack as soon as the weight was taken off it.

The white man was still on guard, and after a quick glance that way, the negro made no appeal to him for assistance, but sinking to his knees, he put a strain upon the rope, carefully watching the result as his trained muscles caused that limp figure to double up.

For a few moments he doubted whether that foot would come loose without risk of worse in-

jury, but then, with a long breath of relief, he worked more rapidly, gripping an arm as the body came within reach, lifting it over the irregular edge and depositing it in a position of safety, so far as falling was concerned.

Not until that moment did the white man show aught of curiosity, and even then his gaunt visage was marked with suspicion rather than sympathy, though he muttered:

"'Tis not *that* devil! 'Tis a face strange to my eyes, yet— Boy!"

"Yes, master."

"Do you recognize him! Can you place him?"

"Not yet, master," came the low response, as the black man lifted his head and temporarily ceased his efforts to restore the life which seemingly had fled forever. "His face is a mask of blood and dirt, and his own mother would hardly recognize her child, just now. But there's no time to waste in idle chatter. He lives—his heart is beating—but he needs better care than I can give him here. I'll take him to the cabin—may I?"

Although put in the form of a question, Uncle Sam did not wait for permission to come in so may words. Lifting that stalwart form in his great arms, he faced the rocks, scaling them with surprising ease, considering the weighty burden he bore.

With an uneasy frown, Mayo Galloway followed after.

CHAPTER II.

"WHAT'S IN A NAME?"

LEAVING the discarded pack to take care of itself for the present, Uncle Sam quickly secured the still unconscious sport upon the burro, then led him away deeper into those wild recesses, doing it all with the rapid, almost nervous movements of one who dreads opposition from a quarter to which obedience is due.

But Mayo Galloway raised no such objections. He had failed to recognize that face as one belonging to his enemies, and just now his sole thought was given to guarding against a possible snare as they picked their way through the broken ground, heading northward.

Fortunately the distance to be covered was not great, though it consumed time enough to justify the negro in his anxious glances toward that limply drooping figure in the pack-saddle. Unless some far worse injury lay beneath that ugly scalp-wound, surely this luckless stranger ought to be showing some signs of reviving, by this time!

When the lone cabin was reached, Uncle Sam removed the rope and took Steel Surry in his arms, tenderly as a mother caring for her babe, bearing him into the house and placing him upon a low couch of dried leaves and grass, covered with the shaggy hide of a grizzly bear.

"Is it worth all this trouble, boy?" moodily muttered the master, fingering his snowy beard while watching the movements of the negro. "He had tasted all the bitterness of death. The last spark of life would have gone out without a pang to its owner, had you left him to his fate. Even now, though trying to save—"

"I will save him, Master Mayo!" quickly cried the black, with an upward glance as he ceased fingering that scalp-wound. "The bones are sound, and it's only the shock that holds him asleep. I'll save his life, and that—"

"Will thanks or curses be your reward, Sam?" harshly muttered the old man, yet drawing nearer that insensate form, with something akin to curiosity beginning to light up his sunken eyes. "'Tis a fair face enough, as times go, and yet—who can say that *he*, too, has not been praying and pining for the oblivion from which you are striving to wrest his brain? Who knows—oh, old friend! when will my time come?"

"In God's good time, dear master," quickly replied the black, his strong arms lending that failing form support, only quitting it when Mayo Galloway was seated in a chair near the blackened fireplace. "Each day brings it nearer. 'Twould have come long since if you had listened to me, master! Even now—say but the word, and Satan shall have his own before another sun comes up!"

"I meant my death, Sam, but you—"

"Mean revenge, master!"

Uncle Sam drew erect, his mighty figure swelling as his hands clinched and rose aloft with a savage gesture. In repose his features were remarkably regular—almost handsome—for one of his race, but now they were almost terrible. His eyes flashed, his strong, even teeth showed white as snow in contrast with his red lips and their jetty surroundings, his breath came hot and swift, his mighty muscles writhing and crawling as though so many angry snakes lived beneath his sable skin.

"Ay, revenge! And why not? What great crime is yours, master, that you should live the life of a hunted hare? Why should you be driven from pillar to post, fleeing, dodging, hiding like one bearing the brand of Cain?"

Mayo Galloway bowed his head until his trembling hands covered his eyes from the dim light coming through the solitary window. His gaunt figure shivered as with the ague, and he shrunk even from that loyal touch as Uncle Sam drew closer to his side.

"What can I do?" he huskily muttered.

"Time was when I was a man, but now—what can I do?"

"Turn and fight the devils!" almost fiercely rumbled the black giant. "It's because you flee that they follow so hotly, master. Turn and face them, once more your olden self, and they'll tuck their tails and run like scared curs! Or give me leave to do the work, and I'll—"

"Hang like a sheep-killing cur! No, Sam," his voice growing steadier as his head lifted, their eyes meeting. "There is only one ending possible, and I feel that it is drawing near. When I am dead and— Ten thousand curses blast the brain that first conceived the idea!"

"Amen to that!" with an emphasis that was almost a groan.

"And thrice amen say I! What has it all come to? I am the last of twenty, Sam! Nineteen lives have gone out, some in peace, others in misery which might have been alleviated by the merest trifle of that accursed money! And others—you know how death came to them, boy!"

"As it should come to some yet alive!" savagely growled the black giant, pausing in his stride toward the still unconscious sport. "By knife and bullet, and noose! Why will you hold me back, master? With Jaffray Pilkington out of the way—"

"Stop! name him not, boy!" huskily quavered the old man, shivering convulsively as he cowered back in his seat, casting affrighted looks around the while. "I can scent death in the very letters that form his name!"

Uncle Sam heaved a deep sigh and his black face filled with gloomy sorrow as he knelt by the side of his patient, using what arts he could command to restore the senses which had so long been lost.

How often had his well-meant appeals ended thus? More times than he could number. And yet—death must come to one! to his beloved master, or the merciless enemy who had hunted him so long and so hard.

Little by little his kindly efforts won their reward, but Uncle Sam sighed anew as he saw his master stealthily closing the heavy oaken shutter before the one window, then shutting and barring the door, before lighting a dingy oil-lamp to relieve the utter gloom thus occasioned.

"That devil might look in—or this one see out!" mumbled Mayo Galloway, in half-abashed explanation. "Who can say 'tis not all a devilish trick to learn just where we are hiding, boy?"

The negro made no answer, for just then Steel Surry opened his eyes and partly raised his head, with a dazed stare at that dark face bending over him.

"Satan at last! But, where's your horns, Old Boy?"

"I take 'em off while in the house," promptly replied Uncle Sam, but with a kindly grin wholly out of keeping with the character assigned him by the bewildered sport. "Easy, boss! you're hardly fit for dancing a jig, just yet!"

"Dance? If my feet were as light as my head! But trot out Madam Proserpine, Pluto, and I'll shake a hoof until you'd think— I say, old fellow, what've you been trying to do with my cabeza, anyway?"

"It's had a pretty hard knock, boss, but I reckon it'll come out all right, if you'll grant it time," one hand gently pressing him back upon the rude couch. "I'm hoping that way all the stronger because 'twas through my doings that you came this way."

"Is that so? Then—I think I heard a shot, and— I say, Lucifer, do you always load your gun with cats of that size?"

"Then you remember—"

"That's just what bothers me!" with wrinkling brows, to which a very unsteady hand uprose. "I remember too mighty much for it all to be truth! Maybe if I got up and took a shake, 'twould settle down more even, don't you reckon?"

Uncle Sam once more restrained the injured man, whose wild words and dazed looks gave him no little uneasiness.

"I'll explain it all, if you'll promise to lie still and listen. Is it a bargain, boss?"

"He talks white, his face is black, his eyes—I say, Pluto, if those are your furnaces, where does the scent of sulphur and brimstone come in at?"

"I'm only a devil to my enemies, boss, and you're not of their number, I'm pretty confident," soothingly said Uncle Sam. "You promised to listen quietly, and of course you'll never go back on your word?"

"Never! if I'm still the man I used to be," with a little nod, but with that puzzled light deepening in his gray eyes. "Am I, though? If not, who am I? And if not, why so?"

"One thing at a time, boss, and first, to explain how I came to get you into such an ugly boggle."

Using a great many more words than he would have thought necessary only for his wish to covertly study this strange phase, Uncle Sam explained how he had, through a providential chance, caught sight of the mountain lion just

as it crouched for a death-leap upon his master, who never suspected how near his end had drawn in his day-dream.

He told how he had heard the wild scream of the horse, followed by the shout which despair had wrested from Steel Surry's lips, as he felt himself slipping over the cliff to meet his fate below.

"'Twas my fault, as you might say, boss, though I had no idea that any one was in the trail when I shot. And so—well, I did all I knew how to make amends, as soon as I saw you hanging there by your foot, head down."

Steel Surry shivered a bit as his truly perilous situation was so minutely described, and Uncle Sam felt more at ease as he fancied he could detect the light of full reason returning to those gray eyes.

Through all this Mayo Galloway had remained silent in his seat, his own face shaded by a hand as he leaned forward to keenly, anxiously scan that of the injured sport.

A more than comely face it was, too, as Uncle Sam permitted Sir Steel to assume a sitting posture, each feature being strong and clearly cut, from broad brow to cleft chin.

"You went down the rocks after me, then?"

"Of course. What less could I do, sir?"

"Then—I owe you my life!"

"You owe me nothing, sir," though his genial smile broadened as the injured man gripped his black hand with warm pressure. "I simply tried to even up the harm I'd worked, you understand."

"You didn't know—how could you? I ought to have been more on my guard, but when I saw that bundle of fur and fury—ugh!" with a little shudder at the memory. "And my horse?"

"Dead enough, poor devil! 'Twas an ugly place for a tumble!"

"And I just missed it, thanks to— I say, stranger, I didn't hit those bottom rocks, to bounce up again, did I?"

"Try to forget it, boss," that anxious look coming back to his face at those wild words. "You were on your way to Break-neck, of course? 'Pears like I've seen you there, once or twice!"

"On my way to—but I didn't really break my neck?" mumbled Sir Steel, instinctively lifting a hand to that portion of his person. "But I don't recognize—where am I, now?"

"With friends, sir," came the swift response, as Uncle Sam cast a glance toward Mayo Galloway.

A half-hidden signal brought the negro to the side of his master, his head bowing to receive the whispered words:

"I've been watching him and I'm afraid—those devils are up to all sorts of tricks, boy!"

"But this is not one of the evil gang, master," said the negro, in like guarded tones. "He is honest and true, or faces lie!"

"They can lie—they do lie! You may be right about him, Sam, but I have learned to trust no man—none save you, old friend!"

"What shall I do; turn him out, maybe to die? His brain is not right, yet, and—"

"Not yet; not until we've proved him honest or a spy! Go ask him his name, Sam. Look! how he watches us! Is not that the face of a spy? Is not— Test him, boy! Test him, and if he fails to stand it, I'll kill him as I would a mad wolf!"

Not until Uncle Sam crossed over in obedience to that signal, had Steel Surry fully realized that another occupant was in the room. He watched them, listlessly enough at first, for his brain was still in a dizzy whirl, but then, his interest growing, he was rising to his feet just as the black giant turned to obey his master's commands.

"Beg pardon, sir, but you said your name was?" hesitated Uncle Sam.

"It was Steel Surry, if I'm not 'way off my base, but— Hello, you!"

That ejaculation was drawn forth by the sudden uprising of Mayo Galloway, pistol in hand, and savagely snarling:

"I knew it, you devil! I'll kill you like— Die, curse you!"

His last words blended with the report of his revolver!

CHAPTER III. THREE OF A KIND.

STEEL SURRY had barely time to realize his peril before that explosion lighted up the interior of the mountain cabin, and his own sorely shaken wits would have been insufficient to save him from the death which Mayo Galloway clearly intended; but, rapid as were the old man's movements, those of Uncle Sam fairly matched them.

With a single leap he crossed that space, his strong right hand clutching and flinging up the weapon, even as it exploded. The flame scorched his dusky palm, and the lead sung sharply in his ear, but its force was wasted on the rafter above.

"Don't, master! You must not do such a—"

A cry of half-wondering anger burst from Sir Steel's lips, and the black giant, warned by instinct, dropped his grip, to wheel and spring toward his patient, just then in the act of drawing a pistol from its scabbard.

However it might have been under other circumstances, just now the handsome sport was little better than a plaything in that mighty grip. A single twist deprived him of that pistol, and casting it into the corner, Uncle Sam pressed Surry back to the couch, at the same time keeping his own massive bulk between the injured man and the mountain recluse.

"Peace, I beg of you!" the black giant cried, in strongly agitated tones, holding Surry helpless with one hand, while using the other to more completely disarm him.

"He tried to shoot me when— What had I done to deserve it?"

"Never trust him, boy! He's a spy upon us! He's a child of the devil, if not one of the original crew! Kill him, or— Stand aside, boy! Must I drill through you, to reach him?"

"Through me, master, if at all," came the swift yet respectful reply, as the negro faced the raging hermit. "Have I altered so much for the worse that you can't trust me, master?"

"You are shielding him, yet you heard what he said?"

"I'll take it all back, rather than stand up to be knocked down!" chipped in Steel Surry, though his puzzled countenance plainly showed how far he was from rightly understanding all this. "I say, Dusky, there are three of us, don't you reckon?"

If Uncle Sam heard, he heeded not. Having disarmed the stranger, he could devote his attention wholly to his master, and with steady gaze fixed upon his face, he slowly moved across the room, muttering:

"Kill me if you must, master, but do not cover me with shame. Through me this life was endangered. I brought him here, and my hands have left him helpless to defend himself. Will you make me a murderer, by taking the life I am trying to restore?"

Not so much his words as his gaze. Mayo Galloway shivered and shrunk before those glowing orbs, though there was neither threat nor reproach in them: only a magnetic power which he had so often and so vainly tried to resist in times gone by.

Steel Surry, still weak and far from his usual self, rose to a sitting posture on the pallet, gazing dizzily at those dimly illuminated figures. He caught part of that speech, but failed to comprehend its full purport. He gave no thought to flight or to arming himself, and that alone proved how little fit he was to care for himself just then.

"He is a Surry!" huskily mumbled Galloway, checked by the rear wall of the cabin, yet clinging to his pistol, as though only waiting a fair chance to send a second shot more surely home.

"But not the Surry, master," came the deep tones of the black man. "Randolph Surry is dead and turned to dust, years ago, while this man—he is but a boy, master!"

"A spawn of the devil, then!" with sudden fury, his free hand striking that broad bosom with fierce force. "I've run my last step! For years I've fled like a trembling hare, but now— Aside, boy! I'll kill the accursed spy before he can work more harm!"

"If you must shoot, master, take this as your target," said Uncle Sam, his mighty figure seeming to expand as he bared his sable bosom, one finger tapping the region of his heart. "Kill this black dog, master, then work your will on our guest!"

"I knew it!" exploded Steel Surry in utter disgust, yet making no effort to rise from the couch. "Three of us, and every man-jack crazy as an intoxicated bedbug!"

Be that as it may, Mayo Galloway was not crazy enough to murder the faithful being who had devoted a life to his service, and flinging his pistol aside, he covered his face with both hands as he muttered:

"Let him do his worst, then. I can't—anything rather than lift hand against you, Sam, dear boy!"

"I say, gentlemen! What sort of institution have I been hoisted into, anyway? Is this the old Bowery, of the days 'when Kirby dies?' Am I drunk, or simply crazy? If so—we're three of a kind!"

Uncle Sam turned swiftly toward the half-mocking speaker, and before Sir Steel could divine his intention, he was lying flat on his back, a knee on his middle, two strong and nimble hands binding him with stout thongs.

"If you are honest, no harm shall come to you, stranger," the black man said, paying no heed to those vain struggles, drawing back as the final knot was complete.

"Unless I'm dreaming all this, reckon I'd stand a heap sight more show were I a cut-throat!" ejaculated Surry, anger serving to partly clear his bemused wits.

"If wrong is done you, sir, I'll pay the penalty you may affix," the negro said, almost apologetically, only to be sharply checked by Mayo Galloway.

"No more in that tone, boy! Let him give thanks that breath is still in his evil carcass!"

"No thanks to you for that, old Cut-up-rusty! Well, here I am, too helpless to frighten even such a miserable cur as you've shown yourself. Shall I shut my eyes, lest the gaze of a white man disturbs your aim? Or—do you prefer the

knife? Roll me over, boy, so he can have a square shake at my back!"

Uncle Sam drooped his eyes before that bitterly mocking speech, but his master only laughed harshly as he crept forward, his gaunt figure crouching, his steps cat-like in their softness, his sunken eyes glittering with an almost insane fire as they gloated over his now helpless captive.

"How well he knows the reward befitting such spawn of Satan! Would an honest man jump so readily at the truth? Yet you can believe him other than what he is; a spy, thirsting for the blood of his betters!"

"Neither mad nor drunk, but simply a case of born without sense. Kick me once, Blackamoore, for falling into such disgraceful company!"

"Shall I question him, master?" asked Uncle Sam, never glancing toward the jeering sport.

"Ay! and I'll watch his face as he gives you back lies!"

"Just hold your breath until my trap opens, will you, Crack-brain?"

"Unless you are all that master believes you, sir, you will talk freely," coldly said the black giant, his stern, gloomy gaze coming back to that bloodstained face once more. "If honest, as I feel, surely you have naught to conceal?"

"Being honest, what does that make you twain, Johnny?"

"Your accusers now, your judges later!" flashed forth Mayo Galloway. "I have taken my last step in flight from your accursed gang! From now henceforward, I'll fight to the death! Not for the money—God's curse rests upon it, and has from the very first. May Satan tighten his grip upon him whose brain first conceived such a death-trap!"

Steel Surry was watching the old man closely, despite all his seeming carelessness, for he more than half expected another vicious attempt upon his life, which the black giant might not be quick enough to foil as before. But as he listened to those harsh, fierce words, a ray of light seemed to enter into his unsteady brain, and he ejaculated:

"By the holies, man, you are—"

"Steady, sir," muttered Uncle Sam, one black hand dropping lightly over his lips. "It's for you to answer, not question. And first: your name is Surry, is it not?"

"I've never cast shame upon it, so—my name is Surry."

"What relation to Randolph Surry, of Roanoke, Virginia?"

"Not any. I'm from New York. I've heard of the man you name, and now I can guess why—"

He broke off abruptly, for the old man bent over him, their faces almost touching as he strove to read the truth in those gray eyes. The captive bore that unpleasant ordeal without flinching, and a faint smile crept into his face as the hermit drew back, with a long breath.

"Cast him loose, boy! Beg his pardon for me. I was wrong—I can see it now!" mumbled Galloway, unsteadily.

"Pardon him, sir," whispered Uncle Sam, as his keen knife cut those thongs and set Steel Surry at liberty once more. "If you only knew how terribly he has suffered! If you could even begin to guess all he has undergone, through—"

"Maybe I can give a guess—thanks, all the same, pardner!" said Surry, stretching his limbs, then sitting up, his gaze shifting to that bowed figure beyond as he distinctly uttered:

"Mr. Galloway?"

The old man sprung to his feet, shrinking back with a quivering cry. Uncle Sam gripped the sport with his mighty hands. But Steel Surry merely laughed, without fear or displeasure.

"What do you mean by calling on that name, sir?"

"No harm, be sure, uncle," came the quick response. "I happen to know those who have lost the track of an uncle by the name of Mayo Galloway, and something whispered in my ear that *this* might possibly be the long-missing one. For, though Randolph Surry was no kin to me, I've heard tell of that unfortunate agreement which—"

"Drop it! Name it not, or I'll forget myself, even as I did a bit ago!" fiercely flashed the old man, his eyes on fire. "Sam, come to me for a moment. Excuse us, stranger, please."

Steel Surry was puzzled by that abrupt change of tone, but his brain was beginning to spin afresh, and he could hardly keep track of those two figures by the dim light as they drew across to the further corner of the little room.

The consultation was brief, and while Uncle Sam busied himself with pots and pans at the fireplace, where he quickly kindled a fire, Mayo Galloway came back to the pallet on which their enforced guest was still resting, his face composed, his tones calm and placable as he said:

"Doubtless you think something more than an apology is due you, Mr. Surry, for much that has taken place here, and yet—I cannot give a full explanation, just now. The time *may* come when I can, but for now, this must suffice: for all wrong I have done you, I ask pardon."

"Granted, of course," with a half-stiff nod. "But, may I not ask if I was right in calling you Mayo Galloway?"

But the strange being had already turned away, sinking into his former seat, moodily watching the negro as he deftly prepared a meal, prominent on the list of which was a pot of coffee.

Had he been more nearly his usual self, Steel Surry might not have accepted this rebuff so quietly, but really he was unfit for talking, superficial though that scalp-wound seemed, on examination.

Like one in a waking dream he watched the movements of the black giant, and when the table was spread with food and drink, he slowly, stiffly rose from his couch and sunk upon the stool placed for him.

"You are still weak, I see," nodded Galloway, watching his movements curiously, with a half-smile twitching his bearded lips. "But after a draught of Sam's famous coffee, you'll be more like your old self. Is it not so, boy?"

"It's hardly for me to say, master," muttered the negro, taking his stand behind the chair of the hermit.

"Then I'll say it for you," with a low, peculiar laugh as he placed a steaming tin cup of the drink before their guest. "You shall be the judge, Mr. Surry. Drink—and decide!"

To a man fasting since early morn, that aroma was more than tempting, and in a measure used to rough campaigning, Steel Surry took scant time for cooling that draught, then set his cup down, empty, saying:

"If I am to act as judge, I must say—What does—*Devils!*" his voice rising to a hoarse gasp as his hands gripped at throat and chest, while an expression of horror came into his face. "*Poisoned—you've poisoned me!*"

CHAPTER IV.

MASTER AND MAN.

It was a frightful sight, that vainly struggling man!

Almost instantly the powerful drug had taken possession of his limbs and body, deadening them before it mounted to his brain. He tried to spring to his feet. He strove to reach across that narrow barrier to grip the throat of that silver-bearded demon, who was actually laughing at his horrible torture.

Instead, as his tongue thickened and his voice choked, he fell over from his stool, striking the floor with the dull, sodden sound of one already a corpse!

Uncle Sam never stirred in his tracks, never lifted his drooping lids, standing like a statue cut in ebony, awaiting the pleasure of his master.

And Mayo Galloway, from smiling took to laughing outright; a harsh, gleeless, unpleasant sound it was, too!

"Lie there, dog of a more dangerous hound!" he cried, harshly, shaking a clinched fist at the fallen stranger. "If all were your caliber, I'd never have spent so many weary years in trying to escape by flight and hiding! And yet—are the rest any better, Sam?"

"They are worse—a million times worse, master!"

"Bah! you still think he is no spy, then?"

"I know it in my heart, master. He is no spy."

"Bah, again! If your heart was half as hard as your head, boy, I'd give thanks. No, that's a lie, old fellow," a softened light coming into both face and eyes as he turned partly around in his chair, to gaze up into that dark, gloomy visage. "I would not have you changed one iota, dear boy! Only for *you*, where would I be now?"

"I've done my best to serve you, master, and now—"

"Now in your old age you want to turn master into man, eh, Sammy?"

"Not that, only—I've treated *him* worse than a dog!"

"Not one half so badly as he deserved, boy!" his tongue growing hard and disagreeable, as he pushed his chair back and rose to his feet, one hand dropping to the belt around his middle.

"What were those brief pangs he felt before his brain failed him, compared to all the torments he has helped pile upon me? Though he had ten thousand lives, the sacrifice of them all would not begin to repay me for what I have suffered ever since that accursed compact was signed and sealed!"

"I know, master, but why should *this* poor devil pay the penalty?"

"Because he is one of that infernal gang! Because he has come here as a spy, to smell out—Bah! Why chatter, when one good thrust of this trusty blade will end all, so far as he is concerned?"

Mayo Galloway whipped forth a knife, brandishing it viciously as he stepped aside to clear the table; but once again Uncle Sam was before him, his massive form barring the way.

"You surely will not murder him, master?"

"Murder? A curish spy like this? Are you mad, boy?"

"I would be, master were I to stand quietly by while you stained your soul, blacker even than my face, with such a terrible deed."

"Stand aside, boy, or I'll forget all you've done for me, and—"

"You can cross my dead body, master," came the low, steady response, as the negro once more opened the coarse shirt that covered his broad bosom. "Your arm is still strong, and your knife is sharp; I should know, for I put an edge on it only yesterday."

"Don't make me strike you, boy!"

"You must, before you strike yon poor devil, master!"

That keen weapon rose, quivering in front of that sable bosom, but even then the giant did not flinch. Instead, he leaned a little forward as though to hasten the stroke. And a faint smile crept into his face as he unflinchingly met that fiery gaze.

A flush crept into that gaunt visage, and the weapon slowly lowered its point, then was flung behind its owner.

"I *can't* strike you, Sam, though—how dare you defy me, boy?"

"Because I love you better far than I do my own life, master."

"Words—empty words!"

"Have I ever failed you when it was time for action, master?"

"Never—until now, Sam," his harsh tones growing a bit softer, though there was still death in the glance which he flashed past his servant to that motionless figure lying so awkwardly on the floor.

"Not even now, sir, as I stand ready to prove to you," came the low but steady response. "If you will not listen to reason—if nothing less than the death of this poor fellow will content you—give me your knife and bid me strike home!"

"What! you would kill him, Sam?"

"At your bidding, I will kill him, master."

Their eyes met squarely, but while those of the black were gloomily stern, a softer light gradually came into those of the white man. And after a brief pause, he spoke again, in softened tones:

"Although you did not choose just that word, Sam, you set down my punishing yon spy as murder. Would it be anything less, at your hands?"

"No, master. 'Twould be murder—foul, useless murder! And yet, if *you* bid me strike, *strike I will*, and home to his poor heart!"

"Yet you guard his life with your own, boy?"

"At *your* hands, yes. I would die a thousand times rather than stand by while you stained your soul with such a crime, master! But—you are master, I am man. I am your slave, just as surely, just as wholly now as before the war. If he *must* die, I will murder him! But—pardon me, master! Why need this black crime be committed? He is no spy, I feel sure, but even granting he is one, why need we take up their tools? There is a better way to get rid of him."

Mayo Galloway turned abruptly away from that appealing gaze, his bony fingers interlocked, his head bent like one in moody reflection.

Uncle Sam impulsively reached out a hand, but then let it drop, at the same time choking back the words that rose in his throat. It cut him deeply to oppose his master—loved to idolatry—but he felt that he was in the right, just then.

"Lord, send him light to see the truth!" he muttered, turning to bend over Steel Surry, picking him up in his strong arms and bearing him across to the grizzly-bear couch.

The luckless man was breathing freely, though with greater rapidity than one in a natural slumber; but as he knelt beside him, finger on pulse, Uncle Sam had no fear for his life, so far as that cunningly administered drug was concerned.

"'Tis a good, strong, honest face," he reflected, his eyes guided by the dimly burning lamp. "Not the face of a spy such as Jaffray Pilkington would employ. Never that—I'll stick to it through all."

If only Mayo Galloway could be brought to see the truth! That was the main point over which Uncle Sam was worrying, and as he caught sound of a light step, he turned, with one arm flung over the senseless sport in protection.

"See, I have no knife, old friend," whispered Galloway, with a faint smile as he showed his empty hands. "He is sound, then?"

"Dead in all save losing his breath, master," bowed the negro.

"Then—surely taking *that* away would not be such a terrible crime! And—why do you hold out that he is no spy, Uncle Sam?"

"Because his is not the face of a tool such as Jaffray Pilkington would make use of. Then, too, I begin to recall him. I know now that he is highly regarded in the sporting circles over at Break-neck. But, even granting that he is playing the part of a spy, what harm can he work us, after the manner of his coming here?"

"Not any, if he goes away a dead man."

"He is the same as dead, master," tapping that face with a finger, by way of emphasizing his meaning. "He came here senseless, he can go away the same, only worse! You closed the window and door, barring out all light. He will never be able to swear that it was not dark when we brought him here; and that doubt will throw him all at sea should he ever try to guess where this hut stands."

"Then you mean to take him away while the drug still chains his brain, Sam?"

"Say I may, master!" eagerly exclaimed the negro, his hands joining almost in prayer as he watched for an assenting sign. "He can never work us harm, even granting that he is Jaffray Pilkington's spy. 'Twill be many a long hour before his brain works clear of that weed—if it ever does."

"There is a chance of that, then, boy?"

"I fear so—yes," with gloomy reluctance, as one hand touched that wounded scalp. "I never stopped to think of this; you must have seen how oddly his brain was affected by his fall, master. It may be that I made the dose too strong, though 'twould not have been for a man of his build, in good health."

Something like a sneer twitched that snowy beard, and Mayo Galloway gazed curiously into the face of his faithful companion. Believing as he did that this man was a spy in the employ of his deadliest enemies, he could not reconcile this remorse with the fierce advice the black had given him not long before.

"You urged me to face our foes, and fight in place of fleeing, Sam, yet now you are almost weeping over one of that cursed gang! If he dies, the drug will have killed him, not us, old fellow!"

"I brewed the drink, and my hands gave it to him, master. But—I may take him away, then?"

"Where to?"

"Anywhere, just so 'tis far enough away from this shack. Maybe to the stage trail, for that matter. I may, master?"

"Will nothing less content you, Sam? Why not dump him on the ledge where his horse met the fate its master far more richly deserved? If he should roll over, in wakening, so much the better!"

"Well, one place or the other, just so you grant my wish, master. I do not ask so many favors, sir, but *this one—may I?*"

Even then Mayo Galloway was reluctant to yield entirely. He had taken a powerful dislike to Steel Surry, even before hearing his name; the name borne by one who, long ago, had attempted to do him a bitter, black wrong, not yet forgotten.

Yet, how could he deny this faithful servant? The only one who had clung to his failing fortunes through dark as in brighter days; the one to whom he owed his life, more times than he dared count, just then!

"Do as you will, Uncle Sam," turning away with poorly assumed coldness. "If harm comes of it, though, don't forget that I advised you for the better."

"Thanks, master!" and with a quick stride the negro caught a hand, to press it gratefully to his lips. "I will answer for him, with my own life! For I'll keep an eye on him, should he ever rally, and at the first sign of treachery against you, I'll find his heart, too quick!"

Without giving Mayo Galloway time to retract his permission, Uncle Sam opened the door, then lifted Steel Surry in his arms and bore him outside, lowering him to the ground while he prepared the sleepy-looking burro for the road once more.

Working with such a hearty will, it did not take Uncle Sam long to put all things in readiness, and with Steel Surry, still limp and unconscious, doubled over in the saddle, but kept from falling by a few turns of a lasso, he paused to bid his master a brief adieu.

"Give the old signal when you come back, Sam," was the only reply vouchsafed by the misanthrope, from the cabin. "Where one spy has come, others may follow!"

Leading the patient donkey by the halter, Uncle Sam hastened away at as brisk a pace as he could induce that animal to assume. The afternoon was rapidly waning, and he knew there was a long as well as difficult jaunt before him.

He had resolved to take the drugged sport across to the stage road before leaving him, as that would afford him a better chance for succor, supposing—as he began to seriously fear—that dose had been given too strong for an already weakened brain.

"It might be a month before another person took the short-cut," he reflected, gloomily, as he steadied his charge over a bit of rough ground. "Even if the stage passes before I can get there, somebody will surely find him—if not to-night, then to-morrow!"

A forlorn hope, truly! But poor Steel Surry was past thought for himself, and was borne onward unwittingly to meet his fate!

It was already more than dusk when Uncle Sam reached the stage road, there to unbind his charge, and prop him with his shoulders against a rock beside the road, leaving him to what fate might come.

CHAPTER V.

SCENTING TROUBLE AHEAD.

So near at hand that it formed a portion of Break-neck itself, yet nearly hidden from that lively mining-camp, stood a small house, that in an older community would have been termed a shanty, or cabin. It was by no means a thing of beauty, composed as it was of stones and

logs, the latter too crooked or too frail to be trusted in shoring up or otherwise timbering a mine, but it looked substantial, and certainly was proof against wind and weather.

Toward this cabin its present owner or pre-emptor, Hardress Pilkington, was hastening, his strong hands clinched, his dark brows gathered into a scowl of angry rage and troubled thought. What might be called a snarl of curses came gratingly through his lips, and without his customary warning touch, he dashed the front door open, showing his strong teeth in a vicious rage as a woman with armed hand confronted him.

"You, is it, dear? I thought—"

"Put up your gun, Kate. Don't you turn fool, with all the rest!"

A sweep of his hand brushed the pistol aside, and without giving its holder a second glance, Hardress Pilkington crossed to a chair, into which he dropped heavily, chin sinking into joined palms, knees supporting his elbows. His heavily browsed eyes were fixed and staring at vacancy, and as she anxiously watched him, Kate Pilkington caught sight of a paper crumpled up in one of his great hands.

She moved nearer, with a slight rustle of her garments, but the dark-faced man moved not, and she paused, to draw back again. When Hardress Pilkington was in a mood like this, not even she dared intrude upon his thoughts too rashly.

They were not among the "old residents" of Break-neck, readily acquired as such a title is in a country where life is crowded into a marvelously short span. They had located there only a few months before the opening date of this record. But their name was far more familiar than the faces and forms of those who bore it now, thanks to the tragedy which took place a bit further to the north, where too liberal use of a knife led to an exact sufficiency of greased hemp.

Hardress, son of Jaffray Pilkington, he who ornamented one end of that pliant sample of the rope-maker's art, was built upon a generous scale, so far as physical dimensions go. In bulk he was above the average even of the wild West, where men have room to spread in all directions without being snubbed for crowding their neighbors.

Standing full six-feet-four in his socks, he was "built according," and one might have wasted many a long day in searching for a more perfect specimen of physical development. Pity that his mental endowments were so greatly inferior.

Not that he lacked in smartness or acumen; whoever picked up Hard Pill as a fool, would be only too apt to drop him again, with scorched fingers. But, brief as had been his residence at Break-neck, the honest portion of that community had already set him down as true to his nickname: a "Hard Pill" indeed.

His hair and bushy beard were red; deeply, darkly, beautifully red! Not with the sandy or "foxy" tinge so commonly seen, but the peculiar hue that is accompanied by a dark skin and black eyes; a combination that is charming in a woman, attractive in an honest man, but when owned by a villain, makes him doubly repulsive to all save his own ilk.

That one loved him passionately, the gaze which Kate Pilkington bent upon his bowed figure just now, bore ample evidence. His sister, as she had been introduced to those few whose feet had crossed that threshold since their taking full possession.

She, too, was built on a more than ordinarily generous scale, from a physical point of view; tall, superbly formed, with almost beautiful features. Just now her large eyes, black as midnight, shone soft and loving, though their ordinary expression was too bold and hard for true womanly beauty.

For some little time Kate Pilkington stood motionless, watching the one man this world contained for her, but then, as he moved not, she silently moved to his side, sinking to her knees, stealing an arm about his bowed shoulders, then softly brushing his temple with her red, ripe lips as she murmured:

"What is it, dear? Are you afraid to trust your Katie?"

For answer, Hard Pill burst into a torrent of oaths and imprecations, ending by opening the hand in which that piece of paper was clinched, but jerking it back as her fingers sought to take possession.

"Hands off, girl!"

"If you say so, Hardress. I only thought to read it, and—"

"I haven't dared give it a square reading myself, as yet," his voice and manner becoming more natural as he straightened up in his chair. "I made out enough to know I'd best be under cover before I took it all in, though!"

"More trouble, then, dear?"

"Not of that sort, though!" with a short, hard laugh as he rightly interpreted that tremor of her arm, that paling of her cheeks. "It's no word of lynching, no notice to quit, Katie!"

"I didn't know. Ever since that terrible day when—when—"

"When father was strung up by a cowardly gang, for shutting off the wind of a dirty whelp

whose teeth were sharpened for his throat! Say it out, girl! I'm not ashamed of the record, though I'll feel more like bragging over it after I've balanced the score—as I've sworn to do in the end!"

"And I'll help you, Hardress!"

"Of course; you're his daughter, since you're my wife."

"Sh—h!" with a quick flash of her dark eyes toward the unshuttered window. "Your sister while here, brother!"

"That's all right, but while alone—never mind! I've got a letter from Mark Huddle, at the other end of the line, and unless he's building up a mighty pack of lies in hopes of bigger pay, there's promise of trouble ahead, little woman!"

"You mean about—"

"Of course I do! Look at this, will you?"

He spread out that half-sheet of note-paper, one side of which was covered with writing; the characters fairly formed, but large, and plainly traced by a hand to which the pen was hardly an every-day companion.

There was neither time nor place set down at the top, though this was plainly the beginning of a letter, for the first line began:

"DIGBY FAIRCLOUGH, son of Theron and Marcia, his wife (she who was sister to Mayo Galloway):—"

"HONORED SIR:—If blood be still thicker than water, and the now sainted mother lives again in the children she has left behind her, I humbly beg that you will give these poorly shaped lines a careful reading, for your own sake, as well as that of another. If you wish to see that other, and at the same time greatly benefit yourself and your sister, bring her with you, and come without delay to—"

That was all, and Kate Pilkington uttered a cry of angry wonder and disappointment as she looked up to meet the sullen eyes of her mate.

"What does it mean? Where is the rest? Who wrote it, and what—"

"Go easy, girl! You've got all that came to me, except what Mark Huddle wrote."

"But that explains this?"

"It makes a stagger at it, yes. You know the job I gave him?"

"To keep an eye on Digby Fairclough and his sister, Enid; yes."

"So he could spring the trap at that end, when all was working smoothly out here; just so! Well, he swears that he has done his level best to earn his wages, and as partial proof he sends me this bit of paper. He stole it, but he couldn't get hold of the rest, and he has no idea who did the writing."

"It surely couldn't have been the old man?"

"It sounds more like the nigger! If I knew he could write—"

"I've heard Father Pilkington say that Galloway brought the boy up more like a brother than a slave. Who else could have written it?"

"Curse that part of it! I'm thinking about what Huddle writes!"

"May I see his letter?"

"No need. He says that he believes they mean to leave for—here, of course, though he couldn't find out to what point. He wrote in a hurry and said he'd keep me posted by wire, as soon as he found out what direction they were to take."

"And you haven't heard?"

"Never a whisper, though his letter is nearly two weeks old!"

"It may be waiting for you over at the end of the line."

"You know better! Jim is on guard there, and he's not one to neglect business at which I set him. No, either they've given Huddle the slip, or he's gone on a bat—curse his thirsty throat!"

For some seconds silence reigned, Hardress staring blankly at that incomplete letter, Kate wrinkling her brows as she strove to see a way through the tangle which came at such an untimely juncture, for them.

"It speaks of Galloway, Hardress," she said, at length. "It bids young Fairclough come without delay, bringing his sister with him. It can only mean one thing: they were to come here, to meet our prize!"

"If he only was our prize—worse luck!" viciously growled the man, his hands clinching tightly.

"He will be—he must be! Think of all that money! Think how much it has cost us already! Think how father Pilkington—"

"Say it!" with a vicious show of teeth as the woman abruptly paused. "Think how father was lynched by a mob for cutting the black heart out of Ozius Popp's carcass! And he trying his level best to kill in place of being wiped out, just to rake in the gold we've counted good as our own for so many years!"

"They were the last—save old Galloway! It all belongs to him, now! To him—unless our plans succeed!"

"As they must, and shall! Father would rise in his grave to heap blackest curses on our heads were we to fail him now! Fail! Never! It belongs to us by rights, and those rights shall be maintained, though the very heavens fall!"

He ended with a storm of fierce oaths, but the woman's red lip curled, almost in scorn, as she looked and listened. Even her pantherish love

for Hardress Pilkington could not keep her silent for long, and when she spoke again, it was sharply enough.

"Why talk so much, when action is needed? Nearly a month has gone by since father Pilkington was murdered, yet you are not one step nigher the end now than you were then. Is his death to go for nothing?"

"What more can I do, girl? Can I fight an entire mob, single-handed?"

"No, but you can win the game for which he lost his life."

"I mean to do so, but I'm doing all I know how, already. I know that old Galloway is in hiding somewhere near here, and feel sure that I'll nab him in the end; but what if they come before we're ready for them?"

"I never met Mark Huddle. Is he any good?"

"None better, when he steers clear of whisky."

"Then why borrow trouble, Hardress? With warning by wire, and a good man watching for it at the end of the road, we surely ought to have all in readiness to receive the comers."

"Yes, if— Curse that dog! Why hasn't he wired, if only to set my mind at rest? Even if they haven't set out so soon, he might have known I'd be on nettles until I heard further news!"

"If he had no news, how could he telegraph? What good, supposing he *did* wire? Drop it all out of your mind, Hardress, and devote all your energies to trapping old Galloway. Without him, we can do nothing. With him in our grip, what harm can those young fools do, even if the nigger told them everything about the money?"

"Not much, unless they passed the word on to others. Three ducks are enough for even us to handle, comfortably."

"Four, counting Uncle Sam," with a darkening frown. "And he is the toughest nut to crack of the lot! Why you've let him run so long, Hardress, is more than I can understand. I'd have downed him for good and all, long ago!"

"Meaning that I should have done so, eh?" glancing up with a sneer on lip as in voice. "Are you so anxious to become a rope-widow, Kate?"

Her eyes did not meet his, for her face was turned toward the closed door in front, her head slightly bent as though in listening.

Her left hand made a swift gesture commanding silence, while her right stole under a fold of her dress, which concealed a serviceable revolver, a weapon which, as often proved, she knew right well how to use.

Then she stole on tip-toes to the front door.

CHAPTER VI.

RUN DOWN AT LAST.

HER free hand touched the knob, but even as she silently turned it around, a clear, seemingly careless whistle sounded from without: a bar from a familiar opera, which could be employed as a signal without fear of drawing attention from those out of the secret.

A signal it was, for Hardress Pilkington sprang from his chair with the ejaculation:

"Open, Kate! 'Tis one of the boys, and maybe— You, is it, Tom Inkstone?"

"Evening, boss—and you, ma'am," said the new-comer, touching his dingy hat and giving a backward scrape with his foot in clumsy politeness.

"Come inside, man!" ejaculated Pilkington, his dark face fairly aglow with fierce hope as he scanned that jauntily grinning visage. "You've got news—I see it in your face, man!"

"Lively, sir!" snapped Kate, drawing aside to give him freer passage. "Do you want all Break-neck to mark your coming?"

"Lively goes, and lively I comes, ma'am," springing across the threshold, and doffing his hat as the door slammed to behind him. "If it shows any lack o' politeness, ma'am, I makes my 'pology in advance!"

"You've found him, Tom?"

"I just have, boss!" his grin broadening, like that of one who feels sure of his welcome. "It's been a monstrous tough bit of work, but I said I'd earn my pay, and I do reckon I've done so much, anyway!"

"Out with it, then, confound you, Inkstone!"

"And tell it straight, my fine fellow," swiftly added Kate Pilkington, with emphasis in both face and tones.

"Do you reckon I'd fetch a lie, ma'am?" with an injured air.

"You did so twice, to my certain knowledge, Inkstone. You swore by all that was holy you had the game holed, but when we tried to close in on it, how then?"

"He was gone, but I didn't lie, ma'am. 'Twas just such crooked luck as will come over a fellow when he least looks for it. He was holed, safe enough, when I set out to let you all know."

"I'm trying to hope this isn't another such case, my fine fellow. If so—you know the old rule: three times and out!"

"Oh, button up, girl!" impatiently interposed Hardress Pilkington. "Give the man a chance to explain, can't you?"

"Precisely what I'm doing, brother," was the cool retort. "It's fact, not fiction we want most, and so— Go on, Mr. Inkstone!"

The spy seemed somewhat cowed by that viragoish reception, but when his back was fairly turned upon her, his face to that other eager one, he quickly found his tongue, though it may have been a bit less flippant than at first.

"You see, sir, I was doing the best I knew how to earn wages, though it did begin to look as though I was down on my luck, when I ketched the roar of a rifle, such as I felt mighty nigh sure nobody but the big black nigger toted in these parts. You know the one I mean, I do reckon, sir, and if it don't make a—"

"I know: 'tis an express rifle. Get down to business, man! You run the nigger down, then? Not the old man?"

"Both of 'em, sir!"

"Where? How? Out with it, curse you for a sleepy tongue!"

"Over north'ard—nigh the Short Cut Trail—shack 'mongst the rocks, so snug hid that you'd never dream o' such a thing!"

"Careful, Inkstone!" warned Kate Pilkington, her black eyes catching a reddish luster. "Don't build a cabin out of pure imagination!"

"That's so, Tom!" frowned Hardress. "I've been over that trail, and if a cabin was anywhere nigh it, I surely must have found it out!"

"So I'd have said, and been ready to make oath to, boss," bowed the spy, but with a coolness which could only spring from truth. "All the same, though, shack it is, and right there your game is in hiding!"

"You saw them there?"

"I followed them there, boss, and I left them there still, when I picked up foot to fetch you the news."

A sound that missed little of being an oath forced its way through those red lips, and Kate Pilkington made a savage gesture as she cried:

"Left them! Left them unwatched, to steal away before we can close in! The same old story, Hardress! My life upon it, this glib-tongue has been hugging a jug in some sunny nook, then hatched up this lie in hopes of getting money with which to lay in a fresh supply!"

"You don't think that way, boss?" asked the spy, squarely meeting the eyes of the man. "You're the very last man on earth I'd dare tell such a foolish lie to."

"You oughtn't to have left them unwatched, Inkstone!"

"Did I say that, boss?" with a return of his confident smile. "Two times was plenty for even me, sir, and so—I made sure they shouldn't round it out with a third. I put two sharp pair of eyes on guard before I made all hurry over this way!"

"You mean—"

"That Jack Ruggles and Fritz England are watching them, boss. Even if they should try to steal away, the boys will follow them, leaving sign enough for us to keep on the right scent."

Ever since speaking last, Kate Pilkington had been keenly watching that face, and now, her last doubts banished, she frankly held out her right hand, with the words:

"Put it there, Tom Inkstone! You're playing white this deal, at all events, and that blots out the past."

"Thank'ee, ma'am," accepting the hand with a broad grin. "If I was playing for bigger wages, I'm getting 'em in a hurry—so!"

Her suspicions set at rest, Kate drew back to a chair, seating herself to listen with greater comfort. And, relieved of that ugly suspicion, Tom Inkstone likewise settled down after the fashion of one who means to make the most of a good thing.

He again spoke of that heavy report, which sounded so differently from the ordinary Winchester, to a trained ear, and then hurried on with his report, which fitted in very well with the matter which had already found record here.

He had been too late to witness the rescue of Steel Surry by Uncle Sam, and had been too far distant at the moment to know aught of the mountain lion; but he had seen the two refugees bearing a seemingly dead body away on the back of a burro.

He had followed them, with a due regard for his own life, through that rocky tract, finally "holding" them in the little cabin nestling under the crags.

"I crawled up closer than I'd 'a' done for any other body than you two, boss, and ma'am," with a bow toward each. "They're mighty bad medicine, I reckon, but—well, I just did it! And if I didn't see enough, through a weenty crack in the hinder side of the shack, to pay me for the hide I rubbed off in creeping, then I don't ask a red cent!"

"Out with it, man! What did you see, or hear?"

Tom Inkstone, hugely enjoying the sensation he was creating, glibly described that table-scene, where Steel Surry was seemingly stricken by death, with his lips still wet from his fatal draught.

"Poisoned him! Who was it?" demanded Kate, almost breathlessly.

"That flip critter they call the Sport from Sunrise."

"Steel Surry, you mean? And they murdered him?"

Tom Inkstone actually hated to do it, but he was forced to tell the truth, even though his climax was lowered a goodly bit. He repeated considerable of the talk which passed between master and man, but betraying a remarkable memory, though he did eke out a few gaps by calling upon his vivid imagination.

"Two or a couple o' times, boss, I'd 'a' let blizzer at the big buck nigger, if the hole I was peeking through had been big enough to let a gun and a fair squint go through at the same time; for I reckoned the black cuss 'lowed to hit back if his boss took him at his word." But it was just all windy guff, and then the nigger carried his point. He toted the sharp outside, packed him on a burro, moseyed off with him, stage-trail-ways, leaving the old man all by his lonesome!"

"If I had only been there!" fiercely grated Pilkington.

"Or any one like a man!" spitefully added Kate as her quota. "Why didn't you bounce him, fool?"

"My orders were to spot, not down, ma'am," with a sulky glance. "And the nigger wasn't more'n outside before the old man had the door closed and the bars up, with a gun in his fist as he looked all around, keener than a cat! For one little bit I really reckoned he had me spotted through that hole, but then I saw different."

"As soon as his back was turned, I crept away, and was trying to study out just what I'd best do, when I caught glimpse of the boys, 'way off 'mong the rocks. That settled it, and I made for them, hot-foot. I told them what had turned up, set them where they could see the shack, as well as any one coming to or going from it, then lit out to carry the news to you-all."

"There was only the two? Only Uncle Sam and his master?"

"Them's all I saw, boss, leaving out the sport. And he wouldn't count, even if he was there still."

"I'm sorry he's come across the trail," muttered Pilkington, with a dark scowl. "He's bad medicine, if all that's told is true?"

"You're right, brother! And as they saved his life first, even this bit of doping hadn't ought to turn him squarely against them! If gratitude for the first makes him fight on *their* side, bad luck us!"

If her purpose was to stir her husband up, Kate could not have chosen her words more wisely. Pilkington lifted his head with a toss that sent his red mane flying, scornfully crying:

"Bah! for him! I could crush him like a fly in my grip!"

"Do it, then! Never give him a chance to talk over what he has seen and heard! Down him, before worse comes of it!"

"I will! Come, Tom, to business! We'll ride over, for minutes are mighty valuable when such a big stake is being played for!"

But rapidly as they worked, another was even more active, and by the time their horses were prepared for the road and led forth from the long, low stable at the rear of the cabin, a trim, dashing-garbed form emerged from the building, to laugh at their startled looks.

"I'm going along, as make-weight, brother," said Kate, lashing her high riding-boot with her whip, as her dark eyes passed down over her figure; now that of a man of middle size, so far as outward semblance went. "Saddle my horse, Tom Inkstone!"

Hardress Pilkington opened his lips to object, but Kate swished her whip before his face so closely that he drew his head back with a jerk, and her words came first:

"No use, brother Hard. I'm going, and that settles it!"

That *did* settle it, so far as his objections went. When Kate assumed that tone and that look, past experience warned him speech would be but breath spent in vain.

Thanks to the location of the cabin with relation to the town, it was easy enough for the little party to pass into the hills without their movements attracting unwelcome attention, and once fairly beyond range of Break-neck, their animals were pressed forward as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit.

It was already growing dusk, and the way lay long before them. Even if nothing arose to hinder them, they could hardly hope to reach the quarter described by Tom Inkstone, before nine by the clock.

"So much the better, if the boys do their duty," muttered Hardress Pilkington, as Kate made this estimate while urging them to greater speed. "They'll be thinking of bunking in, and unless we can catch that buck nigger off his guard, we'll have a tough fight on our hands."

"Shoot him down, first off, then," heartlessly advised the woman in disguise. "He's no worth to us. All we want is his master!"

"And him we'll have before the moon is fairly up, too!"

That was an exaggeration, though, for the nearly round luminary was fairly above the rocky crags to the east, when rein was drawn and the horses left hitched at hint from Tom Inkstone.

"I left the boy just round yon turn, boss, and the shack is only a bit further on," he whispered, as he led the way, already wetting his lips the better to give vent to the agreed-upon signal.

"Not once, but thrice he sent forth that low, tremulous whistle. Only silence answered, and with rapidly beating hearts they crept on, to come to a pause, again as they caught sight of the lonely cabin.

Dark, silent, seemingly deserted!

CHAPTER VII.

WISE COUNSEL THROWN AWAY.

HOWEVER much Tom Inkstone may have embellished his account of what he saw and heard while peeping through that cranny at the rear of the lonely cabin nestling under the shadow of those crags, he had spoken nothing more than the simple truth in declaring that he had left two pair of keen eyes upon their long-hunted game.

Both Jack Ruggles and Fritz England belonged to "the gang" so bitterly spoken of by Mayo Galloway, and each after his characteristic fashion did his best to earn the wages paid him by the Pilkingtons.

Neither man raised any objections to the part assigned him by Tom Inkstone, for it really looked as though they had hold of the best end of the bargain: simply to lie under cover, and take note of what might go on about the mountain shack. And yet, long before the nimble-footed spy could have won half way to Break-neck with his glorious tidings, big Jack Ruggles began to chafe, then to growl and grumble.

"Whar's the use in makin' sech a mighty boggle over a job that mought jest as well be done in a wink? Durn Tom Inkstone, an' double durn his twistified contraptions, say I! Eh?"

"I hain't a-sayin' ag'in' ye, pardner, be I?" whined England, in his meekest tones, shrinking back a bit from that ferocious glare.

Two more oddly mated partners could hardly have been picked up in all Break-neck section, so far as outward semblance went.

Jack Ruggles was big, burly, blustering in all things: his whisper was a miniature roar, his sneeze any other man's thunder!

To one who had not known him long and intimately, his inches were longer than those of any other person's, whether taken up and down, or across, and from front to back. Although something below the six-foot standard, he gave the impression of being at least seven feet high, and broad in proportion.

Not that he was all bluster and empty sound; in case of need, Jack Ruggles could play his part right manfully, viewed from his standpoint. In fact, his greatest failing was the wish to be up and doing, and those who knew him best were wont to declare Big Jack would rather take a thrashing than keep a whole skin through lying low.

Only for the havoc wrought by bad whisky, Big Jack would have been more than comely in face, for his features had been well shaped, his skin clear with the hue of health, contrasting well with his blonde hair and luxuriant beard. But now his skin was rough and pimply, his cheeks bloated, with a purplish tinge, his nose swollen out of all proportion, until it looked something like a parboiled beet, half peeled.

Fritz England was nearly as tall as his mate, but was as narrow as Ruggles was broad, being little better than a skin-covered frame of bones, on which to hang a dirty, greasy, patched and ragged suit of clothes; but those bones seemed composed of india-rubber.

Even now, though he had an abundance of room under cover, Fritz had tied himself up in a knot amazing to contemplate, and when the occasion arose, he could fairly emulate snake or eel in the line of contortion.

His skin and hair—none of the last growing below his eyebrows or in front of his ears—were of nearly the same color; and that might better be described as the lack of color. His head-piece looked as though it might have been molded out of dirty putty, or dirtier dough.

All save his ears! They were of truly enormous size, spreading out in cup-shape at the back, lopping over as though frost-bitten on top, so thin in all parts that the light shone through, giving them a bloody look far from comfortable in stranger eyes.

"Rat-like" best expresses the shape of his face, the one prominent feature being his nose, for both forehead and chin sloped rapidly backward. Like a rat, Fritz was famous for prowling and prying. Like a rat, too, he could fight viciously when cornered; but that corner would have to be an extraordinarily tight one!

Knowing from past experience that he could not pick a quarrel, even of empty words, with Fritz England, Big Jack turned away with a snort of scornful disgust, to stare frowningly at the cabin beyond and below.

"Jest a-squattin' hyar ontel corns grow all over the bottom o' us! Jest gittin' blue-moldy in the eyes 'long o' gawpin' at yen cussed shack! An' him—an' Tom Inkstone 'lopin' hot-foot fer good whisky!"

Ruggles broke off with a sullen snort, brushing a dirty sleeve across his too-dry lips. In

those last words lay his keenest sting, for Hardress Pilkington, even as Jaffray had before him, held an iron grip on his tools, and one condition of their retention was that of total sobriety while on active duty.

"I kin see the durn critter right now, 'thout even shettin' up my two lookers!" moaned the big fellow, squirming uneasily on his haunches. "He's run clean 'way from his lazy, fer he kin snift the whisky so quick! An' us nailed right hyar, never to stir or do nothin' but watch them as ought to be picked right up in a bunch an'—Billy-be-dug-gun ef I hain't got seventeen minds to do jest that!"

"Don't ye, mate!" squeaked Fritz England, shrewdly divining the dangerous temptation which was assailing the big fellow. "Don't ye even come to think of it, now!"

"Why wouldn't I, then?" scowled Ruggles, never in a better mood for a row, be it with friend or foe. "Didn't Tom Inkstone say the nigger was gone, an' the old cuss by his lonesome? An' hain't the boss bin tail-on-fire ever since he come to be boss, 'long o' old Jaff ketchin' hemp disorder, to ketch the critter? An' hain't he done ketched, all but the say-so of it? S-a-y?"

"But we was putt here to watch, not to do nothin' more."

"Putt hyar by who? By Tom Inkstone. An' who's Tom Inkstone? Not my grauny, though I don't know any critter as passes fer a man, on whose back petticut's 'd make a better fit!"

"But the boss, Jack?"

"Hain't the boss jest honin' fer to ketch his grip onto the old cuss? Hain't he payin' us good wages fer to fetch that werry thing round to pass? Hain't he, now?"

It was not often that Fritz England could pluck up courage to argue a point with impetuous Jack Ruggles, but as the big fellow actually began hitching up his trousers, like one who meditates an immediate move upon the enemy, the human rat spoke almost sharply:

"Don't ye even think it, Jack, an' I'm warnin' of ye cold! Don't ye make a resk o' what is a dead sure thing with waiting! Don't ye, I say, an' say it more fer your sake then any other critter's, too!"

"Mebbe you'd like to hold me back, Fritz?" sneered his mate.

"Mebbe you'll wish I hed bin able, ef you fly in the face o' the good word I'm slingin' at ye, Jack," seriously urged the bony man. "It looks too easy, from your pint o' view, but ef sech a thing as a trip or a slip-up was to come o' rusbin' things, what'd the boss say an' do? That's the pint I'm worryin' over, mate!"

"What'll he say an' do? Say 'good boy Jack!' An' kick in the hull dug-gun bung-hole of a full bar'l! An' say, 's'round every drap ef ye kin, Jack, my hero!' An' why not? Why wouldn't he? Eh? S-a-y, you!"

"Mebbe so, ef all went your way, Jack, but s'posin' they was a slip? S'posin' in tryin' to rush things, you was to kick it all over?"

"S'posin' you wasn't a fool, an' thar's a matcher fer ye, Fritz!"

"But, ef he's got the door fast? Ef he's on the watch with a gun in his fist? Ef he was to—"

"Would it come any easier or softer ef we was to lay sleepy hyar ontel that buck nigger gits back? Would it come any easier fer to pin the old man, ef he hed Uncle Sam to back up his doin's?"

"The boss'll come in a hurry, soon's Tom lets him know. Best wait on a sure thing, Jack, an' let Hard Pill do the job his own way."

Good advice, and if offered any one else, Ruggles would have been the first to recognize its wisdom. Being offered to himself, it only made him firmer set in his notions, and he promptly retorted:

"I'm in fer makin' it a sure thing, pardner, an' ef you wasn't blind as a bat in sunshine, you'd see as much, too! I'm gwine down thar, to pin old Galloway afore his nigger kin git back to make it harder. Then, with him fast pinched, what easier then to lay low onder ruff, to jump Uncle Sam when he does come, or say bowdy to the boss ef he shows up the quickest? Eh? How's that?"

Although Jack Ruggles asked the question, he had no idea of waiting for an answer. His resolution was fully formed, and with the growing dusk to aid him in concealing his approach, he began crawling through the convenient rocks, making his way around toward the rear of the cabin.

Far from satisfied with this change of programme, but a little relieved by having so vigorously filed his protest, Fritz England imitated the actions of his mate, more afraid of hanging back alone than he was of advancing in company.

On two different occasions, while Ruggles paused for breath (stolen away by the uncongenial snaking), Fritz repeated his warning, only to dodge a heavy heel as it came back in vicious protest against further argument at his first whine, and to shrink from before an equally heavy fist at his second attempt.

"Shet, an' button, dug-gun yer fer a whiner!" growled Big Jack, knowing how futile would be any attempt on his part to catch that human

eel, even if their proximity to the cabin, under whose roof that precious prize was resting, had not warned him of the worse than folly of coming to blows. "Skulk in kiver ef that best suits ye, an' I'll turn the trick by my lonesome! The bigger pay'll be mine, that way!"

But when Jack Ruggles resumed his crawling, Fritz England followed, just as though the exploit received his warmest commendation.

"Ef it fizzes, the blame lays on him," was his comforting reflection the while. "An' ef it pans out clean dust, then I'll come in fer my sheer, all the same! But—you're gwine in fu'st, Big Jack!"

With the gathering gloom to conceal their movements, it was no very ticklish job to creep through between those thick-lying rocks, and finally curve around to the rear wall of the little cabin. And with a pause barely long enough for Big Jack to regain his breath and lose his broken-winded puffings, the two spies drew close to that rear wall, running their eyes over it in hopes of striking a peep-hole.

Fortune seemed to favor them even in this, for a faint ray of yellow light came through a crevice, and in another moment Jack Ruggles was screwing one of his eyes to the very loop through which Tom Inkstone had taken observations a few hours before.

He saw a bare, forlorn-looking room dimly lit up by the lamp, but his gaze quickly settled upon that bowed form near the fireplace. Although the evening was warm, Mayo Galloway seemed trying to drive an ague-chill from his old blood by hovering over those dying embers.

Ruggles glanced beyond, to the closed door, and a reddish light came into his eyes as he saw that the heavy bar was standing on end near the barrier, nor could he detect any lock or bolt. Surely fate was playing right into his hands!

Drawing back a bit, he waited until the human rat could steal a brief glance, then gripped a bony arm and drew England away from the hole, until it was safe to let drop a whisper:

"It'll be too mighty easy fer any fun!" he declared, almost regretfully, for next to whisky, Big Jack loved a fight. "We'll jest creep 'round to the front. I'll shoulder in the door, then bounce the critter. See?"

"He's got a gun, pard," softly breathed Fritz, but Ruggles flung out a scornful hand.

"Ef he hed a dozen, what matter? I'll pin him so mighty quick he won't hev time to even think o' bu'stin' a ca'tridge! See?"

Fritz England offered nothing further, for his impetuous mate was already in motion, making around one end of the cabin for the front, in haste to carry out the plans he had formed. And, though creeping after him without even the ghost of a sound, Fritz showed no desire to assume the lead!

Big Jack cut precious little time to waste, only pausing at the second corner long enough to cast a glance beyond, lest Uncle Sam should have come into view in the mean time. He could see nothing of the giant negro, however, and stole on to the closed door.

There was neither knob nor handle, but he cared little for that. He knew the weight of his own body, and stiffening his muscles, he sent his massive shoulder forward with a tremendous lurch, which neither bolts nor bar could have resisted. Here were neither, and the door flew open with a crash, yielding so much more easily than anticipated, that Jack plunged endlong across the threshold, giving vent to an angry roar as he felt himself losing his balance.

Another cry, sharper, shriller, then a heavy report and a blinding flash, followed by a stifled cry!

CHAPTER VIII.

UNCLE SAM'S HOME-COMING.

UNCLE SAM paused for a few moments after having deposited the form of the dugged sport in the stage-trail, and the dim light showed an expression of mingled pity and remorse as he gazed upon the work of his hands.

"Lord knows I wouldn't 'a' done it, boss! Not of my own accord, I wouldn't 'a' done it!" he muttered, brushing a hand across his damp brows. "But—master said, and I obeyed."

In that lay the key-note to his character. Born in the same month, of the same year, on the same vast plantation, the two, one a black slave, the other a white autocrat almost from the hour of his coming into the world, had been brought up together.

The same breast nourished them both, for Mrs. Galloway was far from strong at her best, and she never fully rallied from giving birth to this, their only son and heir. And almost the first lesson Mayo learned, was that Sam belonged to him, as his earliest birthday gift.

From childhood they grew to boyhood, to early manhood, together each day of their lives; almost each hour, for that matter. Sam's first lesson was implicit obedience and fidelity to his young master, and that lesson he never forgot, through all the years which followed.

Although against all law, and all tradition, young Mayo insisted on having young Sam to share his lessons, even as he did his pleasures and his wide-apart sorrows. And when he attained

his majority, his first act was to give "Uncle Sam" his "free papers."

That was an empty form, as the faithful black plainly told Mayo, as soon as he could realize that his young master had no intention of driving him away by brute force.

"I was born your servant, master, and I'll die the same, please God!"

And so it bade fair to result. Before the sun set on that important anniversary, those papers had been turned to ashes under the tear-dimmed eyes of the negro, and many a long day passed by before Mayo Galloway learned the truth; not until the first echoes of Civil War were shooting through the troubled South.

Then sore troubles came thick and fast, many of them born of an action which the elder Galloway was prominent in setting in motion, when his son and heir was but an infant; but through it all, Uncle Sam was true as steel, and had he refused this day to carry out the whispered command of his master, that would have been his first act of positive disobedience.

"He said it, boss, and I couldn't disobey. I stood up for your life, even against him, but I couldn't do more than that!"

With those muttered words, sounding like, though hardly meant as, an apology to the misused man, Uncle Sam turned away from the stage-trail, leading the sleepy-looking burro back into the hills.

Although he knew no particular cause for haste, Uncle Sam, of late years, was never easy in mind while absent from his master, and he made as rapid progress as the sluggish burro could be forced into. And as he left the stage-trail further behind him, so the negro cast off all thoughts anent the luckless Sir Steel.

Other, and still more important thoughts were crowding through his busy brain, and from his frequent frowns and muttered ejaculations, his reflections could not have been of the most agreeable nature.

From time to time he broke into audible speech, though one needed the thread which he alone held, to fully understand his divided sentences.

"If they only come in time! If they come at all! they must! Surely—they must come! I wrote enough to bring 'em, surely? Could I have spoken plainer?"

In memory he went back to the stolen hours during which he had so laboriously penned that letter with his toil-stiffened fingers. He recalled nearly every word, thanks to a retentive memory, and now he could see where he might well have made his meaning plainer, his argument stronger. And yet—surely he had said sufficient to bring about the longed-for result, if words alone could avail!

"If they do come—and I'm praying so, night and day! If they do come, will he see them? Will he curse them and me, or will he be cured?"

Two doubting fears, and either one of them enough to rack such a faithful brain, and keep such a true, loving heart on nettles?

It had grown dark long before Uncle Sam won the first point from whence he could catch a glimpse of the lone cabin, and even then his eyes were guided by habit, rather than vision; but he saw that all was quiet in that vicinity, and a long breath of relief caused his broad bosom to swell.

"No light, but even if 'twas safe to show a glimmer, poor master has come to feel better in gloom than in shine," he muttered, veering to one side, as the shortest path to the nightly resting place of the burro. "Lord grant that the bright light is on its way, though! And when that glad day comes—as come it surely shall—then the old nigger can lay down and pass over, content!"

Feeding, watering, caring for the burro, consumed some little time, but when this duty was performed as it should be, Uncle Sam returned toward the cabin, sending in advance the familiar signal which was to announce the coming of a friend.

He instinctively paused with head bent to catch the answer, but none such came, even after he had sent forward a louder trill.

"Sleeping—poor master!" he muttered, even then having no inkling of the terrible truth so near at hand.

But as he came nearer, he caught sight of the open door, until now hidden by the shadow which lay densest in front of the building. His heart leaped into his throat, even as his body shot forward with the name of his old master passing his lips.

Still not a sound in answer, and trembling in every fiber, Uncle Sam paused at the threshold, supporting himself by grasping the door-casing on either side.

"Master! Master Mayo! for love of God, speak to me, dear master!"

Only the dulled echoes of his own voice came back from that dark interior, and knowing that something awful surely must have happened, Uncle Sam rallied his powers, springing forward—to slip and fall heavily as his heel struck some slippery substance.

The hand he instinctively flung out to break his fall, touched the same slimy substance, and

as he sprung to his feet, the giant gave his fingers a shivering shake.

"Blood!" he hoarsely panted, divining the truth instantly. "Master! For God's sake, speak to me!"

He touched the rear wall, but found not what he sought, then struck a match taken from his pocket. By that flickering light he saw that no other stood erect inside the room, nor were any bodies lying on the floor, though—

The match went out, but he had seen enough to turn his heart sick within him, and make his fingers break more than one match before he could get one to set fire to the wick of the broken lamp lying near the overturned table.

As this flared up luridly, it shone upon a great blotch of blood, as yet only partly coagulated by the cool night air coming in through the open doorway.

His own trip and fall had smeared this about, thus preventing him from noting any possible signs which might have been left by those who had killed or been killed; but Uncle Sam was too terribly agitated to do more than make a hasty and superficial examination of that room.

His only thought just then was of his master, and since he was not inside, he dashed through the open doorway, to send his voice pealing through the night. In vain. Only the rock-born echoes answered him, and lifting his tightly clinched hands toward heaven, he hoarsely cried:

"Death to all, if they have dared harm you, master! A dozen worlds wouldn't be big enough to hide the murderous dogs from my vengeance!"

With a desperate effort the black giant crushed down his wild emotions for the moment, feeling that he needed the use of his coolest wit and strongest nerve. He turned back to the cabin, where the blazing wick was already igniting the dry flooring. He paused but for a single comprehensive glance around, which showed him nothing new, then he set his broad foot upon the flame, trampling it out.

At the doorstep he twisted up a bit of dry bark, igniting it with a match, then held it close to the ground. This was too hard and beaten, by his own feet, in part, to take a trail, but he saw where blood had dripped upon several of the little stones, and taking the apparent line, he hastened forward in hopes of finding—what?

"Not his body, pray God!"

He found nothing. The bloody spoor was lost, or had come to an end of its own accord. He passed among the rocks, here and there, but without making any discovery. Then, gripping his head with both hands, he forced himself to calmer reflection.

He knew, now, that their ruthless enemies had surely found out their latest hiding-place. He knew there had been some sort of a struggle, else blood would not have flowed so freely. Had that come from the veins of his master?

"I don't, I won't believe that!" he repeated to himself, over and over again. "Living, he was worth a mint to them, but dead, no, he's not dead! Wouldn't I know the very taste of my dear master's blood?"

He put that stained hand to his lips, and sucked at it, almost savagely. Only to spit, with a hoarse growl that would not have disgraced a wounded grizzly.

"'Tis dog's blood! Master! I'm coming, to save or to avenge!"

In that instant his mind was made up as to his first step. If Mayo Galloway had indeed escaped their enemies, Uncle Sam felt confident he knew where to find him, and at once he turned his face in that direction, running at speed that was marvelous in one over whose head so many long years had passed.

Enough has already been said to show that these two, master and man, were refugees; that only by cunning dodging and close hiding had they been able to preserve their lives and liberty up to date.

This being the case, it is not strange that they should have more than one hiding-place convenient. And now, racing as man rarely ever raced before over such perilous ground, the giant negro was making for another covert, even more difficult for others to find than the one in which human blood had so recently been shed in anger.

For the better part of an hour Uncle Sam maintained that killing pace, only slackening it as he drew near to the spot where, despite his haunting doubts, he kept telling himself his master surely would be found, safe and sound in limb if not in wind.

It was a region even wilder in looks than that where the lone cabin stood, but without hesitation the black giant plunged into a dense tangle of stunted trees and undergrowth which seemed to face a towering mass of rocks; but after passing over a few rods of this, he plunged into a vine-masked opening, then trod the smooth floor of a tunnel of some sort.

Had there been light sufficient to guide his eyes, this would have been seen to be a nearly tubular formation of lava, dating far back to past ages in all probability. In places it was smooth as glass, where an inexperienced foot might have found difficulty in standing safely,

but Uncle Sam made naught of this, nor of the occasional cracks and crevices where the molten matter had separated in cooling.

His sole thought was of his master, whom he hoped to find ahead of him, and when fairly swallowed up by that utter darkness, he sent his mighty voice rolling through the tunnel in a lion-like roar.

He paused as if for an answer, and his heart throbbed fiercely, as he fancied, rightly or wrongly, that a faint sound came back from ahead.

"Master! I'm coming! 'Tis Sam—'tis your old nigger, master!" he cried, almost suffocating with joy, then pressing forward at reckless speed through that utter darkness.

The tunnel was of extraordinary length, considering the nearly level manner in which it ran forward, the rise being hardly perceptible even to one familiar with its every yard of space. But the fleet-footed negro made short work of it, quickly gaining the point from whence, had it been broad day, he could have caught a glimpse of light ahead.

He shouted aloud once more, but no answer came back to his eager ears, and as he leaped into a fairly spacious chamber, he realized how worse than vain his hopes had been, and he cried hoarsely:

"Not here—God save him! And Satan roast those Pilkingtons!"

CHAPTER IX.

A TIGHT SQUEEZE FOR FRITZ.

THE man of bones was far from sharing the contempt which big Jack Ruggles expressed for Mayo Galloway, physically speaking, and though he crept along close to the heels of his obstinate comrade, his weight was kept so balanced that a backward dodge would come easier than a forward charge.

Almost as though the shock had come against his own person, Fritz recoiled when Big Jack's shoulder struck that door, and as the barrier went down, England was safely around the nearest corner of the cabin.

"Ef it's all hunky, he'll be too mighty cock-up fer to notice, an' ef things don't pan out jest so, they won't be no room left fer cussin' at me!"

After this fashion the human eel reasoned while creeping from the peep-hole around to the front of the cabin, and that backward leap was only in accordance with his train of reasoning.

Mingling with the crash of the heavy door as it slammed open and back, came another cry besides the harsh explosion coming from the lips of Big Jack as he plunged clumsily into the room: sharp, shrill, frightened, yet savage and vengeful.

"Knuckle, old man! You're my meat, an'—"

So much in the voice of Jack Ruggles, and Fritz England lifted a foot in forward motion, only to swing it back with double rapidity the next instant, for gun or pistol exploded inside the cabin, and a choking cry of fierce agony bore it company!

Shivering like an aspen, the gaunt spy clung to a projecting knot as support, for the moment unable to advance or retreat, so intense were his emotions; for he knew that death had entered that lone cabin in company with his comrade.

There were other ejaculations, though Fritz could not say which of those two throats gave them birth. There was a brief, confused trampling, as though strong men grappled with each other: a clatter as of furniture being overturned: and then a hoarse, choking sound, as a heavy body struck the rough floor.

"I knowed it!" inwardly groaned the man of bones, as he turned and took to flight, bending so low and moving so swiftly, so sinuously, that he more than ever resembled a snake in human guise. "Jack's downed, an' now the p'izen critter's comin' fer me!"

It was characteristic of the fellow that he had never for an instant thought of going to the assistance of his mate. Even while that brief struggle was going on, when a touch of his hand or his weapons might make all the difference between defeat and victory, life or death to hot-headed Jack Ruggles, Fritz England never once felt that generous temptation.

And yet, as already hinted, the man of bones could fight right viciously when driven into a corner from which escape could only be won by the rapid use of his sharp teeth. And now, fully expecting pursuit by Mayo Galloway, he kept an eye turned to the rear, even while in flight among the rocks and the shadows.

No such chase was made, however, and by the time he had gained a neat bit of cover, that lay perhaps a score rods distant from the lone cabin, without catching even a glimpse of that dreaded figure, something like reason returned to the frightened spy.

What if that savage struggle had been doubly fatal? What if Jack Ruggles had proven the victor, and was now making sure of the spoils?

"He'd lie me clean out o' my rights, to the boss!" mentally snarled the craven spy, forgetting the first supposition in the second. "He'd swar I run off an' never done no good—cuss him fer a blow-big!"

Fritz England was fully as wrath at that idea as he could have been had it had no foundation

on hard facts, and the thought not only brought him to a halt in his flight, but even carried him a few feet backward, so he could have a fairer view of the cabin door.

All was dark there, for, as the table was overturned, the lamp broke on the floor and its light went out; but there was a tolerably clear space in front of the shack, and Fritz England knew that he could detect any movement made by friend or foe in that direction.

He was not kept long in doubt as to which man had come off best in that collision, for, as a dark figure sprang through the open doorway into the clear space, he recognized Mayo Galloway, pistol in hand, and cowered still lower in cover as he saw the old man apparently looking around in quest of other enemies, other food for his gun!

"Not me—I hain't honin' fer any of it, dug-gun ye!" hissed the human rat, his little eyes noting every movement of the refugee, even as his slender legs were held in readiness for speedy flight, in case those movements turned in his direction.

Mayo Galloway did not keep the spy long in doubt as to his intentions, for he paused there hardly a score seconds, barely long enough for one sweeping glance around, to make sure no other enemies were closing in upon him; then, with a wild toss upward of his arms, and a cry that seemed despair itself, the old man rushed away from the cabin, heading almost due north.

"I'm a liar ef he hain't wuss skeered then even I be!" was the interpretation which the human eel placed upon that gesture and that cry. "Tain't o' me he's thinkin', but o' how mighty quick he kin git himself clear out o' sight an'—shell I let him do it?"

If Mayo Galloway had advanced, Fritz would have retreated in hot haste, but he was a true cur in more than his whine; to see another in flight was to him an almost irresistible invitation to chase.

Then, too, he was morally certain that, thanks to his headlong rashness, Jack Ruggles was dead or disabled, though his so acting had put their rare game to headlong flight.

"An' ef I don't keep him in sight, what'll the boss hev to say? Ef I do hole the critter, won't he say it mighty loud, an' with a fall hand to back it up?"

Besides, should the pursued see fit to turn pursuer, Fritz knew that he was a past master in the art of ducking and dodging through rough ground, and though he did not put this point into his mental arguments, it had not a little to do with the fact of his following after Mayo Galloway.

To an ordinary spy, it would have been an extremely difficult task to keep trace of Mayo Galloway without betraying such chase, for a full score of years seemed lifted from the fugitive, and he covered that rough, difficult track of ground at a rare pace. Many an athlete of one-third his age would have failed to hold him level that night, but Fritz England was one man in a thousand when it came to such a test, and from start to finish he never lost sight of his game for more than a single breath at a time.

Until, at the end of a long chase, Mayo Galloway bent his head to duck under a scrubby tree which stood at the edge of a dense thicket growing near the base of a towering mass of rocks.

"Shorely 'tain't a bresh-pile the dug-gun critter bes run so fur to burrow into?" growled Fritz, fidgeting uneasily as the moments rolled up into minutes without bringing a glimpse of his game.

He had chased the refugee so far that he had lost nearly all fears of him or his weapons, but these dreads began to return as Fritz wondered how it would do for him to crawl still closer, on the chance that his game had entered that thicket simply in passing on to a more distant refuge?

"An' yit—thar's them rocks!" mumbled the spy, squirming as though seated on nettles. "He hain't clum' up 'em, or I'd 'a' see'd the pesky critter! Nur it don't look like he'd try to skirt 'em, fer—Holed, by glorious smoke o' sacred sacrifice!"

Right or wrong, Fritz England acted on that impulse, writhing forward like a human serpent, and passing under the stunted tree at the precise point where he had lost sight of the fugitive.

Once past the edge of that thicket, eyesight was of no avail after sunset, but as he silently crept along, the spy used his fingers to good effect.

"Thar's some sort o' trail, fer sure! Did he jest hit a bar track by chance, or is *this* one o' the wha-at's them two've him layin' low through all o' our buntin' fer 'em? Is he jest in thar, a-layin' fer me? Good glory! ef I think it *that* way, I'd skin out, too mighty quick!"

Fritz did recoil as that uncomfortable thought sent cold chills chasing each other up and down his backbone, but after a brief spell of waiting, during which not a single suspicious sound came to his straining ears, he once more crawled on, finally to reach the mouth of the lava-tunnel through which Uncle Sam was to plunge in hopes of meeting his idolized master once more.

Rather oddly, in one of his cowardly, suspicious nature, Fritz England did not give the giant black a single thought, just then. In the glow imparted by this discovery, the importance of which could hardly be magnified from his point of view, he thought only of Mayo Galloway, and the rich reward which would be his when he should turn the long-hunted, long-coveted prize over to the Pilkingtons.

Not until fairly inside the lava-tube did he come to a square halt, shivering afresh as he remembered how easily this refugee had disposed of his mate: big, burly, blustering, yet tough and hard-fighting Jack Ruggles.

"An' me jest a baby 'longside o' Big Jack! An' him on his own dung-hill, so to speak! An' me—an' the boss!"

That settled it! While he might stand in dread of Mayo Galloway after what had befallen Jack Ruggles at the lone cabin, Fritz feared Hard Pill tenfold more, and what would that autocrat say should he carry him an incomplete report?

"He'd do, an' that's a mighty sight wuss then sayin'!" whined the spy, barely above his breath, as he once more crept forward through the utter darkness. "I've got to make up fer Jack, too, wuss luck me!"

Although the tunnel was so smooth and nearly free from obstacles, even to one groping through darkness, Fritz made but slow progress. He was a coward born, but even if he had been reckless as Jack Ruggles, he would hardly have dared to make haste over an entirely strange route like this.

On his knees, using his hands to test each foot of the way before trusting his precious person upon it, Fritz England consumed far more time than he had any just idea of. And he was hardly more than half-way through the tunnel, when his blood was fairly chilled in his veins by a sound that came rolling through that curious tube: the first signal uttered by Uncle Sam, in hopes that it might bring a glad response from the lips of his adored master!

One moment of stupor, then the spy shot forward, much as though lent a kick by that heavy foot, the sole of which was just touching the lava tunnel at that moment. Shot forward, to give a gasping, whining cry as he felt one hand sink into an opening!

Only to the elbow, but that crack was sufficient to lend him a ray of hope: might it not lead to a nook or cranny large enough for him to squeeze into?

In an agony of hope and fear—for that tunnel was a rare conductor of sound, and in his great anxiety Uncle Sam did not think of treading lightly—the human rat sought a hole which might save his precious life from that demon; for he never once doubted who it was that had sent forth that unearthly roar.

His terror was by no means lessened by the memory of the cry which had involuntarily broken from his lips as he fancied the bottom of that strange passage was dropping out beneath his weight, yet that faint, inarticulate sound, so greatly magnified by his fears just now, really gave him time in which to find what he sought for: a little niche or cranny to the left hand, into which he was able to crowd himself, thanks to his lack of flesh, and to his rubber-like bones.

Uncle Sam paused at that faint sound, to listen, then to repeat his signal, as already described. He fancied it came from his master, who must be sorely worn and exhausted by the long and difficult trip he had taken. And yet—why did he not answer again?

Fritz England gave no thought to all of this; his sole care was for his own safety, and he closed his jaws tightly to keep his teeth from betraying his hiding-place by their chattering. He would have checked the throbbing of his heart had he been able, it pounded so horribly loud against his ribs as those heavy footfalls once more came echoing through the darkness.

He gripped pistol in one hand, knife in the other, resolved to make a desperate fight if discovered, yet he nearly swooned with terror as those steps paused directly in front of his lurking place!

CHAPTER X. THE EMPTY NEST.

As the little party came into full view of that dark and silent cabin, Hardress Pilkington caught Tom Inkstone by the shoulder with a strong grip, drawing him closer, to fiercely whisper:

"Where's the boys, you devil? If you've been lying to me, I'll tear your black heart out and cram it down your own throat!"

"I don't—They *was* right yonder, boss," quavered the spy, feeling how helpless he was in that terrible grasp. "Something must have happened to take 'em away, or—"

"Prudence, Hard!" muttered Kate, her white hand resting on that hair-covered member whose fingers were turning that firm flesh purple. "The enemy first, remember!"

"Watch him, then!" releasing Inkstone, to feel for his weapons instead. "If he's been giving me a fairy tale, I'll kill him like a dog!"

"And so you may, boss, if you'll only try for the proof first!"

It was not often Tom Inkstone—or, indeed, any other of the band which had come down from father to son, as a grim sort of inheritance—so boldly faced a Pilkington while in a rage, and his doing so now stood him in good stead.

"You talk white, man!" growled Hardress, grimly. "I'll give you a chance to prove your story, but if you slip up on it—look out!"

"That's all I ask, boss. And now—what comes first? Shall I go see if there's anybody left in the cabin?"

"No. Stay here. Watch him, Kate, and if he tries to steal away, down him, for keeps! Understand?"

"You're wronging Tom, brother, but I'll do as you say. Don't take too much for granted, over yonder, though! Remember, Mayo Galloway has long teeth in his head! And the black—"

She left the sentence incomplete, for already the ruffian who passed as her brother, was on his crawling way to the lone cabin.

With all his savage rage at the bare thought of being once more baffled by those for whom he and his had hunted so long, Hardress Pilkington was too experienced a hand to throw away a single chance unnecessarily, and if he had been the most obedient of brothers, he could not have used greater caution in making his approach to the shack.

He paused at the corner, with an ear pressed to the wall, listening for some warning sound from within the room, but none such came. He saw that the door was standing wide, and that alone was sufficient to convince him the shanty was empty of all human life.

He crept closer to the door, pistol in left hand, ready for use, to stoop or to clab as might be, in case either Uncle Sam or Mayo Galloway sprang forth, his right hand balancing a heavy fragment of stone. He hurled this in through the opening, but only a loud thump and clattering resulted, and then he followed after his missile.

No enemy opposed him, and his harsh shout brought his allies to the door, just in time to catch sight of those bloody signs as Hard Pill flashed a light on the scene.

"Don't *that* look like somebody'd been here, boss?" asked Inkstone, pointing to the red blotches. "May I go hunt for plainer signs, now?"

A snarling curse was the only answer vouchsafed him, but he asked for nothing more, and leaving his master to inspect the interior if he wished, Tom Inkstone passed from that narrow line of shadow to where the moonlight fell unobstructed over the weather-bleached stones.

His keen eyes were not long in catching sight of several little blotches of blood. They felt dry to his touch, but he knew that they had not been there very long, and as Pilkington emerged from the cabin, light in hand, he called his attention to those tell-tale signs.

"Whoever got hurt, has gone this way, boss," he added, crouching like a hound over a cold scent. "On his own legs, or carried by whoever hurt him. I'm not trying to say just which, though!"

"You trail, I'll guard, brother," whispered Kate, pistols in hand as her keen eyes roved rapidly around. "They may be hiding the body, and failed to catch the meaning of the racket you so thoughtlessly kicked up a bit ago."

Hard Pill gave a surly growl. He could not believe that both of his men had been slain by their hunted game, and yet—if they had shed this blood, would they be trying to hide the ghastly evidence? If they had slain Mayo Galloway, they would surely fear to face him, and in that case would think only of flight from his vengeance. If only Uncle Sam had fallen, with Galloway a captive, surely they would be only too ready to meet their master, for his commendations?

The break in the bloody trail which had been the means of baffling the time-pressed negro, proved but a short loss to those now searching. Tom Inkstone took a cast ahead, and finding another red token, his cry brought Pilkington with the light, and from that to the end, the riddle was rapidly solved.

"On guard!" cried Kate, her keen ear catching sound of a suspicious rustling among a patch of scrubbery which they were nearing.

But even as that warning crossed her lips, a red glare shot out from the covert, with the report of gun or pistol bearing it company.

Kate flung forward an armed hand, but before she could fire, Hard Pill sprang forward, coming into line and forcing her to hold her shot.

Straight into that cover leaped the enraged giant, to trip over a prostrate figure, from whose lips came a cry of recognition before the giant could fairly fix his grip upon him.

"You, Jack Ruggles!"

"Jest what's—left o' me, boss!"

Hoarse, hardly distinguishable came those words, but they were enough for the giant and his companions as well, and snatching up the still burning light, Tom Inkstone came forward, to light up that ghastly object.

Shot squarely through the chest, Jack Ruggles was soaked with his own blood below his middle, though he had crammed a portion of his

woolen shirt into that discolored hole, and thus in a certain degree checked the flow of blood.

But as the yellow light fell across his haggard face—grown pinched and hollow-cheeked even so soon—not one of those who now stood gazing upon him, could doubt the nearing end; his very moments were numbered, and the sum total must be pitifully small!

His heavy lids closed, even as they gazed, and then Hardress Pilkington sprang to action. The life of one of his tools had scant value in his eyes, but *this* one must not go out without telling the whole truth.

He held the mouth of a whisky-flask to the wounded man's lips, and like a hungry infant feeling the touch of its mother's breast, the failing ruffian drank, ceasing only when his master pulled the bottle away, with a harsh sentence:

"Who hurt you, and how, Jack?"

"Old Gall—cuss him!" chokingly gasped the injured wretch. "He was tryin' to run 'way—I tried—shot like a houn' dog!"

Once more Pilkington gave the bottle for a few swallows, and once more he drew it back before the wounded wretch was nearly satisfied. But he proved to be by far the wisest judge, and in a time so brief that it told volumes to those experienced minds, Ruggles rallied, even trying to sit up!

"Do it quick, boss!" muttered Inkstone, in an aside. "He's mighty nigh gone, to pick up in such a hurry!"

"I know; button up!" growled the leader, then turning to the wounded ruffian, he plied him with questions, through the answers to which he quickly gained a tolerably accurate idea of what had transpired.

Not that Jack Ruggles confined himself strictly to the truth; even with the grip of death tightening upon his heart-strings, he could not quite do that. He painted his own actions in brighter colors, and then wasted more of his precious breath in cursing his cowardly mate.

According to his story, they had kept watch in quietness until Mayo Galloway showed plain intentions of abandoning the shanty without waiting for the return of his negro. And thinking it his duty to prevent a possible loss of the precious game in the darkness, he, Ruggles, had led the way to take Galloway prisoner.

An accident—caused by Fritz England—had betrayed their coming a bit too soon, and as he, Ruggles, leaped forward to capture the old man, a shot met him squarely in the chest.

Even then their object would have been gained, had Fritz stood up to the rack as a man ought to have done. But while he, Ruggles, closed with and overthrew Galloway, England fled like a cur!

"Then—sick ketched me! I couldn't—he broke—kill him! Say you'll kill Fritz—hell's blackest—ah-h-h!"

A convulsive shudder ran over his muscular frame, and a bloody froth came bubbling through his spasmodically clinched teeth. Pilkington hastily brushed this away, offering the whisky-flask in hopes of reviving the poor wretch, but even that test failed!

"He's spit out his last word, I reckon, boss," muttered Inkstone, with something akin to pity, if not regret, echoing through his tones. "When whisky can't faze him, it's mighty nigh all up with Jack!"

And so it proved to be. All their efforts were in vain. Though he still lived, as his troubled breathing proved, Jack Ruggles was past talking more; and if Pilkington turned away with a scowl upon his brow and a muttered curse passing his clinched teeth, it was because he longed to learn more details, not through regret for that waning life.

"Go watch, in case they come back," whispered Kate. "I'll watch by poor Jack until—Go, brother! We can't afford to throw away even the ghost of a chance, now!"

As it was too dark for trailing, even had the ground round about been of a nature to retain footprints, it was difficult to see what better course could be taken; and in anything but an angelic mood, Hard Pill obeyed, Tom Inkstone following at a respectful distance.

A brief inspection was made of the now empty nest, but nothing came of that search to lend Hardress Pilkington comfort or solace. And on the faint chance of a return, he settled down to watch, in ambush.

Not that he really hoped for the return of Mayo Galloway, after what had taken place beneath that roof; but Jack Ruggles had declared the negro had not yet returned from removing Steel Surry, and there was a bare chance that he might yet walk into the trap thus set.

"If he does come, take him alive!" muttered Pilkington, to Inkstone. "Through him I'll find Galloway, if I have to prolong his dying for a solid month, every minute of which will be hell boiled down!"

But Uncle Sam did not turn up, having passed on before their arrival at the lone cabin, though, of course, they had no means of knowing this. And nothing occurred to break the killing suspense, until Kate Pilkington came up, with the announcement of Jack Ruggles's death.

"He never spoke, but just faded out, like a spark of fire," was her gloomy announcement. "Now, what step comes next?"

"You tell!" growled Hard Pill, with a savage curse. "What can we do, more than we are doing now? At least not until there's light for picking up a trail by?"

"I've been thinking, and—why not use this killing? Why not accuse Galloway of unprovoked murder, and so raise the entire country against him?"

"Why not play the devil, and done with it?" snarled the infuriated ruffian, dashing his clinched fist against the hard ground with a force that broke skin and drew blood. "You know I dare not call too close attention to our game, lest—you know it, and that's enough!"

Kate drew back a bit, and silence reigned for a few moments. Then, springing to his feet, Hard Pill bade Tom Inkstone follow, striding over to where the corpse was lying, a woman's handkerchief covering his face.

Pilkington gave a snarl of contempt at this, snatching away the bit of cloth and bidding its owner stow it safely away.

"Would you leave a clew like that to raise ugly questions, girl?" he fiercely demanded, then signing for Inkstone to assist him, he helped raise the dead body from the ground, bearing it across to the lone cabin, to deposit it on the grizzly-bear couch.

Using the light which he ignited for the occasion, Hard Pill gave the interior a close inspection, prying into each nook and cranny, like one searching for something of far more than ordinary value.

Be this as it may, he found nothing of moment, and piling the firewood in the up-turned table, he set it fairly ablaze before giving over his efforts and passing with his companions out of the cabin.

"What do you hope to gain by this brother?" asked the woman.

"To see if one or the other of 'em won't play moth!"

CHAPTER XI.

AN ODD HOLDING-UP.

"WHOA-up, and get out! You can't come through here—scat!"

A still darker object went sailing through the gloom, striking the nigh-wheeler squarely between the eyes, causing it to snort afresh as it fell back upon its haunches, only kept from turning about and "tying them all up" by the taut reins leading to the box.

"Stiddy, boys! An' who the deuce may you be as—Holy smoker!"

Already a long ways behind his schedule, Joram Lippertoe had let out a few inches of ribbon, even as he kicked back the brake when drawing near the end of the slope, and entering fully into their master's feelings, the goodly team of bays broke into a lively trot that caused the wheels to rumble and the coach itself to sway and swing with a seasick motion as they flew across that brief level.

But then, shape or figure of some sort suddenly rose higher in the trail, there a bit clearer to view, thanks to the moonlight, and as the prick-eared leaders broke their trot, a wild yell came to add to their uneasiness, followed by that bat—for such it proved to be.

That shape resolved itself into the figure of a human being, and as the moonlight fell across its face, Lippertoe fancied he recognized its owner, though even then he could scarcely believe his own eyes.

"Head up, and tail according, Bucephalus! Take my hat, and treat it as though you knew how! Whoa-up! Got no better manners than to cavort right through a gentleman's sleeping chamber?"

"What's the row, driver?" came a sharp demand from one of the lowered windows of the coach. "Not road-agents?"

"Agents be—naw!" snarled Joram, in disgust, then turning his face once more toward that obstacle in the trail, now drawn erect and making tragic gestures with a pair of very elastic arms. "Fer the love o' Moses, pardner, what—"

"What, why, and wherefore? By whose leave or license, Johnny-on-the-rostrum? For shame, darling! Drunk so early i' the shank o' the evening, Pulpit Jacky? And so mighty drunk that you mistake a gent's retiring-room for thy filthy mews?"

"Good Lawd, boss! Ef you hain't plum' crazy, then—"

"Some drunken vagabond!" again came that sharp voice from the stage window. "Drive on, man! Ride him down if he hasn't sense enough to clear the road!" Drive on, I say!

"Augh! swaller yer clapper! Me drive over him? Ketch me doin' of it, an' then ye won't? Don't I know— I say, Sir Steel—"

"Steal, lest thou be stolen! He who filches my weasel-skin, makes me run my cheek as a slate, but he who does the holding-up according to the new light, is—*whoa*, January! This world may be thy oyster, but that's no sign you need try to turn my title into a slipper for—and still the villain pursued her!"

Forcing the horse back, the man in the path snatched up his hat, to cock it rakishly over one ear, then to strut to and fro, with gestures even more fantastic than had been those displayed before.

"Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble, the more yer drink, the quicker you'll see double! Fact, if not precisely poetry, gentle pilgrim adown the vale of— *Who said rats?*"

"I never didn't, boss, but—ef ye hain't Sir Steel, the sport the boys at Break-neck talk of, then who on airth be ye?"

"Bee, hornet or yellowjacket—*buzz-z-z!*"

"Who-ap! the devil—"

"Nay, fool! the devil's dam! Crook thy knee, base varlet, and make thy handsomest leg to the Witch of Endor! Wouldst have me transform thee into soaring buzzard or lowly tumblebug? Wouldst—"

"Out of the road, you ranting fool!" came that angry voice from the coach, this time accompanied by head and shoulders far enough to catch the eye of that grotesque holder-up.

"Ha! 'tis *thou*, Sir Little-pot Boil-over? Is that thy ruby nose glowing before mine eyes, or is't the favor of thy lady-fair?"

"I'll ruby your nose, fool, if you keep us here any longer! Driver, whip up, or I'll—"

"Hick-ups! Hold your breath while you count a thousand, one a minute, with a nap between spells, and if at first you don't succeed, spit the seed out and rest content with the pulp! In other words, this world is full of woe, wo-men, and she who fills my soul's sanctuary with her glorious charms, lays 'way over any other who—*ha!* false, knight of the sorrowful—but, come to think, that's *me!* And as *me*, I stand ready to uphold against one and all, single and sundry, the peerless charms of—of—I can't recall the name, just now, but everything goes, and the Old Boy is keeping case!"

Through all this whimsical rigmarole, the speaker kept in motion, striding to and fro, but without clearing the road sufficiently to permit a free passage of the team. His arms were swinging, swaying, lifting up at brief intervals for a hand to clasp his temples, or brush across his eyes.

Now, for the first time he assumed a position where the moonlight fell squarely upon his face, while under the eyes of the irate passenger whose angry commands had thus far gone astray.

A sharp cry of amazement burst from his lips, and he involuntarily recoiled as he seemed to recognize that pale yet blood-lined face.

"Surry—Steel Surry—and *here*, like *this!*"

A faint cry broke in upon his words, and there was a hasty bustle inside the coach, but the crazy sport appeared to take it all as part of the fantastic play he had originated, and with a still more tragic stalk, he moved along nearer that window.

"Ay, vile caitiff! With steel will I maintain it, and though thou comest armed with bolts of fire and fury, forged on the hearthstone of fallen Lucifer, still will I trust to my buckler of truth and—*and other things—but that's a false start*, and the bell rings us back!"

"Into thy toothbrushless teeth do I cast it, presumptuous varlet! Thy boasted damsel is a—just consider that title split in the middle, with a letter added to each moiety, to round it off and make the truth more binding! And so—where's that infernal prompter, with his cues? Gone after another beer, leaving me to chew soap in vain, while the gods in the gallery—peanuts and oranges? Thank Heaven! I feared 'twas henfruit of last year's vintage!"

"I say, pardner!" ventured Lippertoe, leaning over from the box, his voice taking on a coaxing tone rare indeed in one of his ordinarily rough, blunt action.

"Say me no says, base— Welcome back, fellow supe-in-misery!" the drugged sport cried, as that face once more appeared at the window. "If you've caught the right cue— *Who* says I'm a heathen Chineef? For tricks that are— Blessings hover all over the vile jester who emptied a bumble-bee nest in my brain-pan!"

Both hands flew to his head, and swaying dizzily on his feet, Steel Surry seemed on the point of falling to the ground.

"Drunken dog!"

Full of disgust came that exclamation, and the Sport from Sunrise rallied sharply, his hands dropping, his head drawing erect, a swift stride carrying him close to the side of the coach.

The passenger instinctively flung up a white hand, as though to ward off a blow, but none such came. Instead, the sport turned his palms outward, his fingers fluttering as with strong emotion, his voice husky and full of poorly disguised eagerness.

"Can I believe me ears, me eyes, me everything? At last! at— Hold on, I'm getting ahead of the procession! Hast thou a strawberry brand pasted on thy precious carcass, wayward wanderer through the wilds of I've forgotten? Thou hast? Ha! me che-ild! Me noble boy! Come to the he-art of thy long-suffering daddy! Come—all in a heap!"

Steel Surry caught hold of a shoulder, but his hand was struck off, and his imperfect grip broken by the inside passenger.

Again that faint, feminine sound from behind the young man, and he flung an angry word back over his shoulder:

"Quiet, sister! This drunken ruffian can bluster, but he can do no worse hurt! He is not fit to—"

"True, I fit, I bled, I died, and then was kicked clean down the street, because I couldn't pay the barber! Barberous barbarity! And the sword of Bunker Hill hangs over my mantel, along with the goose—goose and gingerbread! Who'll buy my wares? Cheap, all cheap, oh! Only a penny a grab, and a wrapper of twilled silk goes with every mouthful! Only a pauper! Rattle his bones, over the stones, and if he groans too loud for the peace of sleepy neighbors, let the driver sit on his mouth! And speaking of driver—you're another, Jack-in-the-box!"

"An' waitin' mighty patient, Sir Steel, fer you to climb in or hop up aside o' me," coaxingly interposed Lippertoe, unable to do more than hold his nervous team in check, worried as the animals were by those shifting tones and fantastic gyrations, so foreign to their experience.

"Hop-o'-my-thumb? Ye lie, base villain! I'm the cow with the crumpled horn, that—No, sir! Wrong again, and I'm reading proof! I'm Fuss-in-boots, for one of my corns has gone on a bender—Kate Bender! She of the bloody hammer and Kansas pit—pity me, gentle strangers! Pity and alms, for I'm an-hungered! For seventeen long weeks not a morsel of bread has walked through this yearning trap-door! For nine weary months have I labored to find a free-lunch stand, and all I've found were packages of leather, done up in my poor coat-tails!"

Staggering as through sheer weakness, the drug-crazed sport brought up against the side of the stage, and with an angry growl, he who had spoken for all inside, gripped a shoulder to thrust the unwelcome customer further away.

At that touch, Steel Surry rallied, his right hand closing upon the throat of the passenger, giving him a violent jerk as he thundered:

"Hands off, Bobby, or show your warrant! I never was taken, save by a photographer, and he— Now you have done it, stupid!"

In that brief but fierce struggle, the fastening of the door was turned by some chance, and the panting passenger came tumbling headlong through the opening, and Steel Surry was only saved from sharing his fall by breaking his hold and springing aside.

A womanish cry came from the interior at that fall, but Steel Surry neither heard it nor saw the veiled figure that came to the opening.

His antagonist was scrambling to his feet, with an angry oath, and before he had fairly reared himself upright, another insane fancy took possession of the sport, and clasping the man in his arms—seemingly stronger than ever, despite that pernicious drug—he set up a wild dance, whirling his unwilling mate around like a top as he chanted:

"Tis my delight, of a starry night, to dance and prance, and— Here we go, on heel and toe! Keep time, darling, an' thou lovest me! The eyes of all this little world are upon us, and— Glory to my poor corn-patch! Oh, pardner, how could you do it?"

With a groan of genuine anguish, Steel Surry flung his dizzy partner away, to lift an injured foot and nurse it between both hands as he hopped nimbly in the attempt to maintain his balance.

With a savage snarl, the fellow scrambled to his feet and aimed a fierce blow at the face of the crazy sport. Had it taken full effect, the battle would have ended even as it began, but he who struck was dizzy from that mad whirl, and he who was stricken only caught a glancing blow.

Still, it stung smartly, and dropping his foot, he put up his hands in artistic fashion, ejaculating:

"Ha! 'tis war—gory war, me noble duke! Good enough, and I'm your dumpling—red-hot, just from the pot! How's that for a starter?"

A quick thrust went home, and the head of the passionate passenger went back, but still he was of good mettle, and quickly came again.

"Lay on, Macduff, and blessed be he who first calls I've got my plenty for once! And in the words of the— No, I wouldn't now!"

His forearms weaving from side to side, deftly brushed those furious blows aside, without letting even one make fair connection, but as he slowly shifted ground, the crazy sport was brought face to face with a young woman who filled the open door of the stage, a sheet of moonlight falling fairly across her pale, frightened face as she flung back her heavy veil, to gasp:

"Don't— Spare him, brother!"

A hoarse, choking cry escaped from the lips of the sport, and his hands dropped nervelessly as he stared wild-eyed at that face.

His adversary struck heavily, and Sir Steel fell like a log, just as Joram Lippertoe wrapped his lines about the brake-handle, to cry out:

"Now you hev done it! An' him the whitest man on two legs!"

CHAPTER XII.

A "LOCOED" SPORT.

WITH those words upon his lips, the driver leaped from his box, but another was before him.

The young woman sprung out of the coach, flinging her arms about the man's neck, just in time to keep him from falling upon the luckless being who had so ridiculously treated him.

"Brother—you shall not harm him more!"

"The drunken brute deserves it all, and a thousand-fold more! I'll pummel the life out of him! I'll—"

"He's down, and what more can you ask, young fellow?" bluntly demanded another passenger, stepping forth from the coach, and pushing in between, just as Joram Lippertoe snarled over a shoulder while kneeling beside the fallen sport:

"You'll chaw cold lead ef ye dast to tetch him, durn ye, critter! Jest as ef ye hedn't done hurt 'nough, this way! An' him wuth more in a 'weenty minnit then you'd fetch at auction in a thousan' year!"

The young woman broke away from the one she called brother, her voice so full of emotion that her speech was hardly articulate as she spoke to the honest driver:

"He is not—not dead?"

"Dead-drunk!" sneered her brother, trying to restore his disarranged garments.

"He is not— Oh, sir, say that he is not killed?"

"Enough—too much, girl!" angrily muttered her brother, springing forward and almost rudely drawing the young woman back, forcing her to the door of the now empty stage. "Get in, Enid! Don't make me—"

His voice lowered so that no other ears could catch the ending of that sentence, even had they been listening, which was not the case. The third passenger had joined Lippertoe in the examination of the fallen sport, and for the time being brother and sister were left to themselves.

"Have you no pride—no self-respect, girl?" the young man added, as he followed his sister, slamming the door shut behind them. "Would you give you drunken villain another chance to boast of—"

"Don't—I beg, brother!" moaned the girl, shivering like a leaf as she cowered in a corner, hiding her face in veil and hands. "Spare me, Digby! I did not mean to be so weak, but—it came so suddenly, so unexpectedly! And when I saw his face, and when—"

"A drunken beast, now as always!"

Spitefully enough came those words, and they met other ears than those of his sister. A hairy hand came in through the open window, and that hand gripped a self-acting revolver!

"Ye lie when ye say that, critter!" sternly cried Joram Lippertoe, his little eyes flashing over that leveled tube. "Git out o' this, an' see how mighty quick I'll make ye eat yer words!"

"How dare you—" began Digby Fairclough, hotly, but a cry of fright from his sister cut that speech short.

"I don't mean to shoot, ma'am, beggin' yer pardon, hastily explained the sturdy driver.

"Leastwise, ef this gent 'll play white fer jest a minnit or two. But he's flung nasty words at as white a sport as ever trompled in shoe-leather, an' he's no gent ef he don't take a fair chance to mend his mistake. So—climb out, I tell ye, sir!"

"You'd better, stranger," cut in the other passenger, more placably. "Like you, I thought Sir Steel was drunk, but I've owned up my error like a man, and you ought to be willing to do the same thing."

"He is not—he will recover, gentlemen?" quavered the girl.

"Silence, sister," sternly interposed Fairclough.

"If only to keep you from making a bad matter worse, I'll get out to—not because of your threats, though, you understand, driver?"

"I hain't keenin' a dug-gun how or why ye do it, jest so ye come," was the grim retort, and Joram drew back his weapon, leaving the door free. "You said the sport was drunk, and I say he's locoed!"

Digby Fairclough emerged as the door was swung open, but as his feet touched the ground, he hardly seemed to know what step to take next. But his doubts were quickly solved for him.

Joram Lippertoe gripped an arm and forced him over to where Sir Steel lay on the broad of his back, the clear moonlight falling on his up-turned face.

"He looks dead 'nough, don't he, pore critter, But drunk—git down on yer hunkers, critter, an' sniff o' his breath!"

Before Fairclough could divine what was intended, strong hands gripped his shoulders, a deft foot tripped him up, and then his head was forced close to the face of the unconscious sport.

"Smell, dug-gun ye!" gratingly muttered Lippertoe. "Kin ye ketch even the weentiest whiff o' ary thing as makes drunk come. Is that the trap-door to a stillery? Be them puffs out o' a groggery, eh? Not fer a cent, an' ye knows it, I'm thinkin'!"

He relaxed his grip, and permitted the bewildered man to rise to his feet, when he was taken possession of by the merchant from Break-neck, who seriously said:

"He has been drugged—fouly drugged, sir! Like you, I fancied Sir Steel was on a tear, but now—he's locoed, sir!"

"I don't—even if it's as you say, what matter to me?"

"Nothing, of course, if your prejudice is so strong you're willing to stand forth as a liar."

"Sir! do you mean to—"

"Fight you if you insist, young fellow, and ask no favors on account of my gray hairs. You wronged as good a man as ever wore hair, and that before a young lady who— You've known Surry before this?"

"I'm not aching to renew the acquaintance, sir!" was the stiff retort. "Enid, you here again! Go back—"

"And you'd better keep her company, sir," quickly interposed the merchant, whose name was Alfred Kindred, his keen eyes taking note of an important fact. "Sir Steel is beginning to rally, and if I'm right in my belief that he has been drugged, the sight of your faces might give him a dangerous shock, after this fainty spell."

"Will he—you don't think he'll—die, sir?" timidly asked Enid, even as her brother urged her back to the coach door.

"I hope not, young lady, but it's hard to tell," was the grave response. "He's had a terribly strong dose, or he'd never have acted so crazily; but—please go! I'll not answer for the result should he catch even a glimpse of your face or figure, just now!"

Kindred hurried the young couple into the stage, and none too soon, if he really had faith in his own words. Already Steel Surry was able to lift his head, and as Lippertoe lent a hand, he rose to a sitting posture, staring dazedly around, one hand pressing his temple.

"Where—where's my horse?" were his first words, and Joram unhesitatingly made reply:

"Gene on ahead, don't ye 'member? Ye 'lowed you wanted to ride rest o' the trip 'long o' me, an' right proud I'll be to hev ye too!"

The unsteady gaze of the "locoed" sport fixed upon the coach, and something like a shudder crept over his frame as he muttered softly:

"Sh-h-h! not a whisper, man! Don't wake 'em up again, for—it's haunted! It's full of spirits! I saw—what was it I did see, man, dear?" a piteous quaver coming into his voice as he turned an imploring gaze into the face of the driver.

"Waal, not knowin', blamed ef I kin tell ye, boss!" muttered Joram, scratching his puzzled head with one hand, while the other was used to covertly summon Alfred Kindred to his assistance. "Did you see ary sort o' doin's as mought be called spooks, or sich, pardner?"

"You have had a shock—a stroke of something like apoplexy, Sir Steel," gravely said Kindred, taking one of those trembling hands between his warm palms. "Don't try to recall the wild fancies, but try to forget all save that you are with true friends, who'll do their level best to pull you through in safety!"

"You're white, and I thank you, sir," returning that friendly pressure, but then jerking his hand free, to clasp his brows for an instant before muttering, more to himself than to his friends:

"I saw—was it only a crazy vision? I saw—God!" his hands joining together as they uplifted in unison with his eyes. "How I loved her! How sweet and dear was it to me, the mad fancy that she, too, was beginning to love, not as I loved, but sweeter far than—I saw her face, and I heard her voice! Yet, how could that be?" he said, in more natural tones, as he cast a glance around. "In this wild, remote region where— The devil's afoot, and I'm dancing to his piping! Ho, ye jolly good fellows! Pick up your feet and— I say, pardner, aren't you Joram Littletoe?"

"Lippertoe hits it closer, pardner, but I hain't kickin' 'bout a weenty mistake like that! An' now, ef you're strong 'nough fer to ride a bit, boss, I reckon we'd as well be moggin' 'long to Break-neck."

"Strong enough?" laughed Surry, springing to his feet and catching the driver in his arms, heaving him clear of the ground and giving him an upward toss that settled him with a grunt on the box. "How's that for elevation, pardner? Shall I toss up a horse to keep you in good countenance, old socks?"

"Good glory, no!" spluttered Joram, just upset enough to make that wild exploit seem possible.

"You're coming 'round all right, friend," said Kindred, taking hold of an arm, lest another crazy freak take possession of the athlete, but having no little faith in his calming gaze.

"Will you go inside, or—"

"Inside?" shinking visibly, his voice lowering. "Why, man, dear! it's worse than a coffin! It's chuck full of spooks and spirits and—"

"I know. They're mine. I'm taking them to town to start a side-show," coolly answered the merchant. "But if you'd rather take a seat with Joram, on the box, maybe you'd be a little more comfortable."

"Well, I should remark! Up I come, Limbertoes! And you, pardner, just yank 'em back by leel or toe, if any of your freaks try to get up on the roof, will you?"

"I'll take care none of them bother you, Surry."

"For your own pocket I'm saying it, dear man," with a return of his former reckless laugh. "If one should show up, I'd feel in duty bound to lay it—lay it out, too!"

"Git in, Kindred, an' we'll git up!" quickly called out Lippertoe, his professional instincts returning now that his fingers felt whip and lines once more. "Way ahind schedule time, we be! Gid-ap, lads!"

For some little time Steel Surry sat the box in silence, acting so quietly, so much like his usual orderly self, that the driver gradually lost his natural dread of a further outbreak on his part. And so, driven on by a burning curiosity, he began cautiously to question the sport as to what had happened to bring him to such a hapless condition.

That was a luckless move on his part, as it proved, though for a time Surry showed no signs of excitement such as had marked the scene of that odd holding-up. But then his replies grew more fantastic, and before they were nearly to Break-neck, he was rattling on wiler than ever, so far as his limber tongue was concerned.

Joram Lippertoe felt no little uneasiness as he thought of Break-neck Chute, now at no very great distance in advance, but as Sir Steel confined his fantasies to odd speeches and mixed up snatches of song, he concluded not to risk making matters worse by halting to transfer his present companion to the inside.

"Wake 'em up a bit more lively, pard!" cried Surry, at length, his disturbed fancies switching off on a more dangerous tack. "We're 'way behind schedule time, and I've an important rendezvous to keep at Break-neck this evening! Touch 'em up, I say, man!"

"Git-ap, boys!" clucked the driver, but drawing the lines tighter, to counteract that spurring sound. "We can't go too much hurry, boss, fer Break-neck Chute hain't much funder, an' you know we hev to rough-lock the hearse at the top o' that!"

"That's so: I forgot," said Surry, quietly.

And he sat almost as still as a statue until the top of that long and perilous descent was gained, where Joram Lippertoe drew up his team, according to rule. At this point the hind wheels were usually both of them secured with strong chains, an iron "shoe" being placed under each, to save the tires from wearing unevenly by sliding over that stretch of flinty road.

"G'v me the lines, Joram, while you lock," said Sir Steel, taking the ribbons and also grasping the whip. "Now—hold fast, all! And don't you worry, Horace! I'm Hank Monk, and I'll fetch you through on time!" he yelled, lashing the team, and sending them plunging madly over the level, then down Break-neck Chute at terrific speed!

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW FRITZ CARRIED THE NEWS.

So far as the record shows, Fritz England could hardly be accused of a religious tendency, yet, during those few seconds, he came as near as he knew how to praying: praying that this black demon might pass on his way without wasting further time over an adversary so immeasurably beneath his notice!

If the spy had not been so entirely terrified, he might have precipitated the discovery against which he was trying to pray, for he thought Uncle Sam had scented his presence, and was only holding back his blow until he could more precisely locate his victim.

Instead, the faithful black was listening for a sound from his beloved master, before sending forth that last passionate appeal. And then, all unconscious of how narrowly he was escaping bullet and steel, Uncle Sam rushed on through the darkness, hoping to find light beyond.

Hardly able to realize his escape, thus far, Fritz England still cowered there in that little niche, weapons clutched in hands that were almost too unsteady to wield them had the need arisen, and there he was still when Uncle Sam gave forth his choking cry on reaching the end of his dark trip: a cry that sent a different thrill through the body of that skeleton spy.

"Puzzlin' Peter! Be I a fool, or bain't I? Ef that don't mean—"

Fritz did not attempt to tell himself just what it did mean, but he caught an idea from that apparently despairing cry that awakened his instinct as a spy, and for a brief space his mind hung on a pivot; at one breath he could only think of flight, headlong, and ending only when his legs could carry him no further; at the next, he knew he ought to creep still further ahead through that ugly darkness, to learn the whole truth.

"Ef I don't, how'll I lie it over safe 'ith the boss?"

For a good many minutes that mental battle waged, and Fritz himself could not have predicted with anything like certainty what the outcome was to be.

Physical fear urged him to lose no time in making his flight good, and then a close cousin to that very dread, bade him think of Hard Pill and the near future. One failure more had been recorded, thanks to the hot-headed impatience of Big Jack Ruggles, and while he, England, had argued his level best against such an action, would his plea be believed, or, if be-

lieved, would it be accepted as a sufficient excuse for his returning with life and without exact news concerning their game?

"Sufferin' saints!" the bony spy groaned, below his breath. "It'd be big money into my pockets ef I hadn't never bin bornded! Ef I go on, I'm bloody murdered by that big buck nigger, an' ef I don't go on, the boss'll jest—Durn the luck, both ways an' back ag'in!"

In the end, however, the spy instinct, backed as it was by fear of Pilkington's rage and hope for his largess, carried the day, and as no further terrifying sounds came from that end of the tunnel, Fritz England silently groped his way forward, straining his eyes and his ears to their utmost capacity, in the end to be rewarded by the dim red glow as of a torch or a wood fire.

A few moments later the spy was peering over the edge of a convenient rock, taking swift notes for future use and profits; for, after his first shrinking glance, he could hardly doubt but that he had run the game to one of their accustomed dens!

Theirs, for Mayo Galloway was seated near the little fire which had been kindled on a smoke-blackened stone, and long since this, the black giant, who hovered near his master, had learned why his signals had failed to receive the longed-for response. Fatigue and intense excitement had well-nigh done their evil work, and the old refugee might never have rallied from that death-like swoon, had not Uncle Sam come to his assistance.

Fritz England, temptation assailing him as he saw how weak and unmanned Mayo Galloway seemed, leveled a revolver and brought its sights to bear fairly upon that broad, black breast as Uncle Sam stood motionless above his master.

A slight pressure of the finger would let the pointed hammer drop, and with a cone of lead through his heart—but was his hand steady enough? And if yes, would one little pellet be sufficient to slay outright? Would he not cling to life long enough to leap forward and—ugh!

Fritz almost let off an aimless shot in his shivering at that ugly thought! What would he be in that infuriated demon's grasp?

For some little time the unnerved spy lay shivering beneath that friendly projection, neither seeing nor hearing, though master and man were now conversing together, and on a subject in which even Fritz might be expected to take a deep and abiding interest.

Their silence, not their speech, roused the cur at length, and only taking time enough to make sure they were not thinking of renewing their flight, England used his rat-eyes to the best possible advantage.

"The boss'll hold me down turrrible class, an' ef I can't reel it all off 'thout ary a boggle, it's mighty lucky I'll be ef he don't pay me off in tougher coin then kicks! An' jest one o' them lifts from his hoof'd send me higher 'n a kite in a gale."

He did not waste much more time, but he saw enough to confirm his belief that this was by no means a new refuge sought by their game; on all sides lay tokens of former use and habit, and Fritz shrewdly suspected that if it had been day without, the light of the sun would have paled that thrown around by those crackling fagots.

"Jest stop right whar you be, critters," he mentally said, turning to writhe his noiseless way back through that curious passage. "Jest lay low, an' keep a-doin' of it that same way, is what I'm prayin' of all two both o' ye, now!"

Although a goodly portion of that passage had been traversed while he was frightened nearly out of his wits, Fritz knew that there was no dangerous pitfall in the way for his reception, and when at what he deemed a safe distance from that firelit chamber of refuge, he abandoned his crawling, rising to his feet and hurrying on, with arms arched above and before his head, as a shield against a possible lowering in that glassy roof.

Instead, he needed to guard his feet, for one of them came down in a depression sufficient to destroy his balance, and with a half-stifled cry of terror, the spy pitched forward at full length.

No serious harm was done, so far as Fritz could say, and he wasted no time in making an examination. He scrambled to his feet and took to hasty flight, fearful lest the sound be carried to the ears of his enemies. And the dread of Uncle Sam made him blind to all else; what was a possible fall, to falling into those terrible hands?

Not until he was fairly out of that passage and rapidly making his way through the thicket, did Fritz England draw a full breath; and that seemed more intoxicating than a gallon of proof whisky!

"Whooray fer me! Whooray fer my git-off-cl'ar! Whooray fer the news I'm totin' to the boss, an' double whooray fer the pay he'll shell out fer them same news!"

Where another man might have wasted valuable breath in putting these cheers into loud words, Fritz England contented himself with letting them float through his busy brain, using that breath to carry him further toward his goal.

Only when clear of that thicket, and beyond the first little rise in the ground, did he permit

his legs to pause; and then only because his never-still eyes caught sight of a dull, red glow on the sky-line almost due south from where he now stood.

"A fire, by hokey! An' who's— The boss, by holy!"

The truth flashed across his keen brain as by intuition, and without further delay, Fritz England tightened his belt, then sped forward as rapidly as his wire-like and wiry legs could carry his bony body.

Despite all the extra exertions he had been called upon to undergo that evening, that rate of speed would have put a horse to shame, and sorely tasked the best of Indian runners to have kept pace with him.

Where a horse could only have walked, and an ordinary man have but taken a dog-trot, at the best, this bony phenomenon leaped and bounded, ducked and dodged, flying over obstacles which would have called for a waste of time in circling, heading direct for that lurid beacon-light, his sole thought being to reach it before the hand that struck fire should have passed away in disgust.

"Cain't I see it all, plum' as ef I hed the pictur' afore the two eyes o' me?" the spy reflected while pursuing his difficult way. "Don't I know the boss did that, him own self? Don't I know he's come, red-hot an' still a-beatin' 'long o' what Tom Inkstone told him? An' when he didn't ketch what he 'lowed to ketch—glory to fury!"

The subject was too lurid, too full of danger at even that distance, for idle picturing.

Possibly if Fritz England had divined all of the truth, instead of merely a portion of it, his pace would not have been so reckless, his haste so great; but believing as he did that Big Jack Ruggles had been slain outright in his rash attempt to capture Mayo Galloway, he trusted to the tidings he was bearing to carry him clear of blame for what had taken place at the lone cabin.

Only one break came in that crazy-seeming race against time, and that not until more than half the distance was covered.

A dull, rumbling sound caused the bony spy to halt abruptly, his head turning as on a pivot, as his rat-like eyes scanned the sky.

"Thunder! But—whar's the clouds?"

Not a cloud was to be seen, even by his keen eyes. The moon was shining brightly, and but few stars were visible; so few that rain seemed an impossibility, according to tradition. Yet—thunder that dull sound surely was!

"What's the odds, so long's ye'r' happy?" cried Fritz, as he resumed his course, all the more rapidly from that brief breathing-spell. "An' ef I hain't to say happy, I'm totin' news that'll make happy come to the boss, or I'm crazy afore my time!"

The way was difficult, even for such a marvelous pedestrian, and long before the spy reached his journey's end, that red beacon-light was fading away, without having effected the purpose for which it was started; no moths came to Hard Pill's lamp!

In his deadliest, because silent, rage, the chief was about withdrawing to a more convenient spot for awaiting the return of daylight, trying to hope that then he might be able to pick up and follow the trail left behind by his fiercely-longed-for prize; but before he could actually make up his mind to relinquish that other hope, a panting cry came to his ears, and as his eyes instinctively took the right direction, they fell upon a coming shape which could not long escape recognition.

"Fritz England!"

"On deck, boss!" panted the boy spy, now that the end of his race had come, feeling no conscientious scruples against letting his fatigue be seen, and possibly a little more than he actually felt.

"After the battle, of course!" viciously growled Hard Pill, one hand gripping a pistol-butt, though the turn of his body as yet hid that motion from the eyes of the seemingly exhausted spy. "Where's Jack Ruggles, my fine fellow?"

"Gone to glory, I reckon, boss!" with a passing shiver as he cast a glance toward that pile of still glowing ruins. "Ef you didn't find him afore—"

"I've found you, dog! Now—out with it! What have you to say for yourself? How explain my finding this, when I had a right to expect something so different, so much better? How explain your currish cowardice in letting my game get away, yet stand here without break or scar on your infernal carcass?"

"I didn't—good glory knows, boss, I didn't help to—"

"And I know that, which is so much the worse for you! Why didn't you help? Why did you run away just when a lift from your hand might have made all the difference between—To your knees, dog!" his voice deepening, his armed hand coming forth from concealment, to cover the now thoroughly frightened spy with an ugly muzzle.

"Don't—I'll tell—I know whar—" gasped Fritz, his knees giving way beneath his bony weight.

"Brother!" cried Kate Pilkington, springing

between, cutting off that vicious aim with her own body.

"Out of the way, Kate! I'll kill the cur, if it kills me!" raged the giant; but then Fritz England managed to splutter:

"Don't, boss! Let me show you whar they're hid, fu'st!"

CHAPTER XIV. NO THOROUGHFARE.

HARDRESS PILKINGTON caught his wife by an arm, swinging her rudely out of the way, then leaped to the side of the cowering spy, whose reception was so vastly different from the one he had pictured while making that reckless race against time, 'cross-country.

"You say—you know—out with it, dog!" snarled the ruffian, his pistol-muzzle denting the putty-hued skin of the spy as it struck against his forehead.

"I know—I come back to show ye, boss!" quavered the unhappy wretch, longing, yet fearing, to shrink away from that deadly weapon. "Don't shoot, boss! Don't kill me, or you'll never find 'em!"

Hardress Pilkington drew back his armed hand, thrusting the pistol into its holster at his middle. He spoke in cold, forced tones:

"All right, Fritz England. I'll give you a chance. If you can do what you say, I'll reward you, more richly than you dare dream. If you are lying in hopes of escaping punishment, still I'll reward you—but with a difference!"

The bony spy shivered as though he would dislocate his members at that significant conclusion, yet, knowing how surely he carried his pardon back of his tongue, he found courage enough to meet that burning gaze and say:

"I wouldn't dast to lie to you, boss. I've jest come back to tell you how it come to pass. I've jest come back from holin' both the buck nigger an' the white man, his master."

"He means it, brother," interposed Kate, who had been closely watching England's face while he spoke. "I'll go bail he has important news, and if you'll let him rally his wits a bit, all will come right!"

"Beg pardon, boss," ventured Tom Inkstone, who had been casting anxious glances around the while. "But if Fritz could see this flare from 'way off, what's to hinder it fetching others here?"

"I started it for that very purpose, didn't I?"

"To fetch the nigger or his boss, yes, but—"

"They'll never come, sir!" spluttered England. "They're holed whar they can't see the flare, even ef they was to look fer sech a thing! Nur they wouldn't come anyway, beca'se—"

"Tom's right, brother," said Kate Pilkington. "We can watch, if you reckon it's worth while, but we can take cover ourselves while doing it. Come, Fritz!"

The spy hastily rose to his feet, and as Hard Pill raised no objections, Kate led the way to a spot some little distance away from the glowing ruins, where there was less danger of their being seen, in case any curious persons should be drawn to the spot by the fire-glow.

"Now, out with it, man!" growled Pilkington, nodding toward England. "You say you have holed the game?"

"Cross my heart ef I hain't, boss!"

"Without their suspecting you?"

"Never no more then if they never knowed I was horned, sir!"

"All right—if right! And you know what you may expect if it proves to be not right! Now—how came the trouble about?"

Although so thoroughly frightened, Fritz had caught enough to feel pretty sure Hard Pill knew or suspected too much of the truth for him to attempt too open lies, and hence he opened with a tolerable accurate recital of facts.

"An' I did the level best I knowed how to talk him out o' the fool notion, sir, but all I said wasn't no good. He'd tuck the idee into his head, an' git it out I jest couldn't!"

"He was to blame for going against orders, I admit," coldly said Hard Pill, "but since he did make the break, why didn't you lend him the helping hand he called for?"

"Him? Me? Why, boss, ef Big Jack was to come back to talk, he'd say him own self that I done all I could to—eh?"

"Don't dig a grave with your own teeth, Fritz England!" came the grim warning. "Big Jack did come back to talk, and he said that if you had been a man, or half a man, instead of being a cur beneath mention, he'd have held his grip on Galloway, and made it good beyond a doubt. Now—why didn't you help, in place of running away?"

In such critical emergencies a man's wits will do rapid work, and when Hard Pill paused for a reply, it was all ready for him.

"Beggin' pardon, boss, but—Jack got downed fer keeps, didn't he?"

"Yes, but he lived long enough to brand you, man! And he asked me to punish you for your curishness: a pledge which I gave, only too willingly, too!"

"Jack was a good boy in life, boss, but—he knowed he was flyin' in the face o' orders, not to speak o' the good 'vice I slung at him. 'Tain't fer the likes o' me to say he was lyin'—on pup-

pose, that is—but he didn't know what I knowed, nur he couldn't see what I see'd, boss! An' that was the buck nigger comin' on the 'lope, both han's full o' guns, an' jest a-bilin' all over!"

"Why didn't you drop him, then?"

"Beca'se I hain't no shot to brag of, boss. An' then he was jumpin' over them rocks wuss'n a buck deer! An' ef I'd 'a' missed, whar'd 'a' bin my chance fer to run 'em down to 'nother hole?"

"And you did hele them, Fritz?" interposed Kate, impatiently.

"I did, fer a fact!"

"Then, brother, why waste more time in talk? Ruggles is dead, but he brought his fate on himself through breaking orders. Fritz may have played the coward, but he has redeemed that fault by doing what a better man might easily have failed to do, earthing our game for us!"

"You're right, sister," admitted Pilkington. "Look to the horses, Inkstone. And you, Fritz, can ride the nag my sister—"

"Thanks, but I prefer to ride him myself!"

"We're going to bag our game, and that's no sort of work for you."

"All the same, I'm going to take it in," was the spirited retort. "Tom's nag can carry double if Fritz must ride."

"Which they hain't any need, ma'am. The way's so mighty rough a man afoot kin lay 'way over a hoss-back. An' then, too, I don't reckon thar' any sech monstrous hurry in gittin' thar. They've tuck to a mighty snug an' home-like hole, an' a'ter what's happened right byar, I do reckon they'll be only too glad to lay right low fer a spell."

"All the same, I'm taking no more chances," doggedly said Hard Pill. "You're going to lead us there, England, and if you fail—look out!"

"Ef thar's ary 'nother slip-up, boss, 'twon't be none o' my makin'."

"If it is, your life shall pay for it!"

Tom Inkstone just then came up, leading the horses, and without wasting more breath in speech, all save Fritz England mounted, the spy leading the way as actively as though he had been resting for a week.

This willingness was not without its due effect on the suspicious giant, and long before that journey among rocks and gullies came to an end, he was on good terms with his spy, and had drawn from him a tolerably accurate idea of the new place of refuge to which his long coveted prize had betaken himself.

As before, the horses were abandoned, temporarily, when further advance on their backs might prove dangerous to their evil hopes. On a still night like the one in question, sound travels far, and a single clink of iron against flint might render all their toil in vain.

Not a cloud dimmed the vault of Heaven, despite that dull rumble which had so startled the spy on his backward trail, and the faint echo of which had even been noted by the others at the ruined cabin. Hard Pill spoke of it now, while pausing for a comprehensive look around.

"I'd like it better if 'twas a storm, as we reckoned when that distant clap came. If that black devil should be on the look out, he might catch sight of us while we try to cross over to yon thicket!"

"If trouble was gold, you'd borrow enough in a minute to keep us a solid year in greatest luxury, brother!" half-sneered Kate, moving forward along the line indicated by Fritz England.

Hard Pill did not deem it wise to retort, and making the best possible use of the convenient cover by the way, they all drew near the edge of the thicket, reaching it without a sound arising to betoken danger to themselves or to their plans.

Hasty though his retreat had been, Fritz had been deliberate enough in making his first trip, to take note of everything needful, and now he proved the value of that caution, by leading his little force direct to the mouth of the tunnel.

"This is the way, boss," he whispered, pausing, then writhing to one side as though too bashful to even think of preceding his betters. "Ef you was to try, sir, you couldn't go astray, now!"

"That's all right, my fine fellow, but you're going ahead. In with you, and mind: I'll kill you without mercy if you try to skulk now!"

"Sh-h!" whispered Kate, warningly, her lips coming close to the ear of her reputed brother, to add: "No chatter! This tunnel will carry sound like a telephone-wire!"

"Then button up! Go on, Fritz!"

The human rat obeyed, because he was where he could do nothing else. And after him, in single file, the trio crawled on hands and knees, all feeling how important silence was while stealing upon such dangerous game.

Making use of his hands as a warning against another such accident as had come so near (and much nearer than he thought, too) betraying his espial to Uncle Sam and his master, Fritz took no thought of other impediments, until his bowed head struck rudely against what seemed to be a wall of solid rock across the tunnel!

That fact, rather than the pain of the collision, wrested an involuntary exclamation from

his lips, although he instantly closed them with a skinny palm, shivering with terror as Hard Pill pressed up to his side with a growl of vicious warning.

"You fool! what's the matter with—Fury!"

His outreached hand struck that barrier, and a few rapid motions quickly convinced him that their further progress was barred!

"You devil!" he snarled, making a blind grab at the spy in the dark, his fingers touching, but failing to close upon that shrinking figure.

"It's a pocket! You've lied to me, and I'll—"

"'Deed I didn't boss!" huskily quavered Fritz, in mortal terror. "'Twas all open when I—They blowed it up!"

"I'll blow you up, curse you! Stop him, there!"

But the warning came too late for it to be of service. Fritz had writhed past the bewildered couple, and now was rushing blindly along the back-track, thinking only of saving his own precious hide, without much care as to silence for the time being.

"Don't be a fool, brother!" muttered Kate, as Hard Pill turned about and attempted to start in chase. "That rumble! They suspected something, and blew up the passage, to prevent pursuit. I feel it is so!"

Nevertheless she followed closely after the infuriated giant, with Tom Inkstone bringing up the rear, neither of them pausing to make a more careful inspection of the barricade just then.

From the outer edge of the thicket Kate caught sight of Fritz England, peering over the top of a rock nearly out of pistol-range, no doubt in readiness to betake himself to head-long flight should his dreaded master show signs of vengeful chase.

"I believe he's honest in this, brother," the cool-witted woman declared, as she made this discovery known to her mates. "If he had lied to save himself, back yonder, why did he lead us so cheerfully? Wouldn't he have taken one of his many chances to escape, by the way?"

That was a reasonable view of the case, and Pilkington was forced to admit as much. Then, as Kate offered to go forth and reassure the spy, she was once more given her own way.

By advancing openly, with empty hands raised above her head, Kate managed to win near enough the cowardly fellow to assure him that no harm should befall, in case he did what lay in his power to repair this unlooked-for block in the game.

"He couldn't 'a' knowed I was follerin' of him, boss," said Fritz, when, a little later, he met his master on friendly footing once more. "Ef he hed, why didn't he lay fer me in the dark?"

"Then what made him blow up the passage, thus penning himself in?"

"Jest on this side, boss!" eagerly adding: "Though I couldn't take oath that way, I'm mighty nigh dead sure the hole runs cl'ar to t'other side o' the ridge! An' ef we sorter lay low, watchin' with all eyes, I do reckon we'll ketch 'em yit!"

"It's worth a trial, at all events, brother!"

"Especially as this way ends in no thoroughfare! Well, we can try!"

CHAPTER XV.

UNCLE SAM MAKES A DISCOVERY.

FOR once the faithful black had cast aside the caution—better because purer than suspicion—which had almost become second nature to him since this bunting and hiding of his master had become a settled fact.

Not only in his mad, breathless race against time from the blood-marked cabin to that mountain nest, but later, after he had restored Mayo Galloway from that deathlike swoon.

And, while Fritz England was shivering with terror lest that huge bulk be hurled upon him for even daring to think of sending a bullet in that direction, Uncle Sam never gave a single thought to the possibility of their being spied upon.

Enough for him, just then, that his idolized master had once more slipped through the toils, once more escaped with life and limb. It was reserved for unlucky Fritz himself to give that old caution a revival.

Uncle Sam had asked no questions, at first, it being enough for him that his master was found unharmed by bullet or steel; but as strength began to come back to him, Mayo Galloway began to talk, and ere long the giant black knew fully as much about that adventure as his master.

"I killed him, but could I do less, boy?" repeatedly demanded the old man, a tremor in his voice, though he strove to make it so cold and stern.

"He deserved death, master. Was he not striving to take your life? You struck in self-defense, and that plea will stand good before man, as it surely does in the sight of Heaven."

"He came with a crash, roaring, cursing, a thunderbolt! I was lost in thought, of the past, when—but never mind that, boy! He came, and my first thought was of Jaffray Pilkington! I shot quickly, for I believed 'twas that fiend, come to finish the work begun so—but when we closed in a death-grip, I knew better!"

"I wish it had been that demon, master! But never mind; his time will surely come, and ours come with it. Even Satan cannot uphold his own forever!"

Neither master nor man, thanks to the seclusion they had maintained for so long time past, were as yet aware of the double tragedy by which son had succeeded father.

This was the matter of their conversation while Fritz England was cowering in his nook of espial, trying to decide upon his wisest course, and had that human rat been less thoroughly frightened, he might have found food for both amusement and profit in their talk.

As it was, he beat a noiseless retreat from that dangerous vicinity, and only for his incautious haste after having put what he deemed a safe space behind him, his espial might never have been so much as suspected by the refugees, until their enemies should swoop down upon them to end the game forever!

That tunnel was a rare conductor of sound, and more than half-stifled though that involuntary ejaculation was by its author, Uncle Sam caught the faint echo, and sprung to his feet from the bed of dry leaves upon which he had sunk only a few seconds before.

Mayo Galloway showed no signs of having heard aught suspicious, and as he sat nearest the mouth of the tunnel, Uncle Sam fell into a perfectly natural error, and his eyes turned to a quarter directly opposite the right one.

Rising to his feet, counterfeiting a yawn lest the movement give his master premature alarm, the negro crossed the chamber to an irregular niche, which had been one of the points taken note of by the spy: a narrow, crack-like aperture, which really led to the outer air, much as Fritz England had suspected.

While himself hidden from observation, Uncle Sam could look down upon the bare rocks nearly a hundred feet below, or away over the wild, desolate region to the east and southeast, mile after mile.

"It surely sounded from this way, but—what was it? A bat, knocking a bit of rock down with its wings? I never knew them to strike—and it sounds like—almost like a human voice!"

Failing to hear more, or see aught, Uncle Sam lay down, crawling forward until his head and shoulders were on a level with the edge of the cliff, enabling him to scan the rocky base without running too great a chance of being seen himself, in case an enemy should be attempting to scale those rocks.

He could see nothing there, and gradually extended his gaze, sweeping the horizon from left to right, to give a start and a smothered ejaculation as he made a discovery, at last!

Not the one for which he had prepared himself, however, nor one which he could interpret off-hand.

Far away over the rocky waste, and so nearly due south that only by sending his glance along close to the face of the cliff itself could he catch even a partial glimpse of it, was a dull red reflection, as of a fire.

"A blaze, surely, but—the cabin!"

Uncle Sam drew back hastily, never for an instant doubting the perfect truth of that intuition. The lone shack which had afforded them comfortable shelter up to that very evening, was now going up in flames, and who but an enemy could or would have applied the torch?

"I put the last spark out before I left. Then who—Surely it can be nothing else, coming from that quarter?"

To solve that possible doubt, the negro knew he must seek another, and less obstructed point of view, and with that purpose he returned to the chamber, where Mayo Galloway was dozing as he sat on the rude couch.

"I will not be gone long, master," the black said, passing from chamber to tunnel without giving time for awkward questions.

He hastened through that passage with an ease gained by thorough familiarity, and reaching the mouth which led into the thicket, he was not long in confirming the startling suspicion which had flashed across his brain at first glimpse of that red light.

"It's the cabin, sure enough!" he muttered, gazing fixedly at that distant beacon-light.

"Who could have set it? Was master mistaken? Could there have been more than one of those devils? If so, why didn't he help his pard? Why didn't—What if he did?"

A red mist seemed to shoot across his eyes, and Uncle Sam actually staggered on his feet as that thought struck him: what if he or his master had been dogged from cabin to hill by some one of their deadly enemies?

If by more than one, an attack would almost certainly have been made upon them, off their guard as they were. Yet, with their refuge mapped out in his brain, one enemy would soon become a host!

"If either, they must have followed master," was his next reflection. "He must have had at least an hour's start of me, and surely they would not have lain low near the cabin all that time? Yet—if they dogged him, where were they hidden when I came along?"

Vaguely hoping that Mayo Galloway might cast a little more light on this new and dangerous puzzle, the black turned to retrace his steps,

all the while racking his faithful brain for a possible remedy without urging his exhausted master to renewed flight.

"He's growing old, and he's bending under more than the weight of years, poor man! Curses cover all those who are hunting him to worse than death! If I could only talk him into fighting, in place of fleeing from them! If—I'll do it myself, orders or no orders, rather than let this go on as—Hal!"

His foot stepped on some object that turned beneath his weight, yet which could hardly be a bit of stone. Stooping and groping for it, the black gave a smothered ejaculation as his fingers closed upon the cold blade of a knife!

"Not mine—nor master's!" he muttered, his fingers readily deciding that, as they felt of both blade and handle. "How long has it lain here? Who could have lost it?"

Striking a match, Uncle Sam inspected the keen, untarnished blade, and looked for name or initials on the haft. Nothing of the sort was discovered, yet he felt almost certain it had recently been the property of an enemy—of a spy!

"That sound! Could it have come from here? Could a spy have been right on our backs without our suspecting it? Or—did master take the knife from the villain he shot?"

There was a bare possibility that the true solution lay in this direction, and Uncle Sam lost no time in putting it to the test. He used matches to light his way back to the chamber, but more to make sure no enemy was lying hidden in the tunnel, than because his steps required such assistance.

As cautiously as he knew how, to avoid rousing premature fears, he questioned his master more closely regarding that brief fight at the lone cabin, and learned what he sought: that Mayo Galloway had brought no trophy of victory away with him!

Leaving his master to doze off again, Uncle Sam slipped material for a torch out of the chamber, together with certain other articles for which he might find use, then gave the tunnel a careful inspection by torchlight.

He failed to find aught else that could help to throw light on the puzzle, and once more gave that weapon a careful looking over. It looked as though it had been used quite recently, though the lack of stain or rust was no positive proof that it had not lain in that dry spot for weeks, or even months. And yet—

"'Twas dropped less than an hour ago, and I know it!" was his dogged conclusion. "The rascal tripped, and fell—his foot caught in this crack! And as he fell, the knife dropped from its sheath! And in falling, he uttered that cry I barely caught—curses on my thick pate for not turning the right way!"

His torch was burning low, but Uncle Sam cared little for that. In making their refuge there, he had thought long and thought well, providing in advance for almost any emergency, that he might not be taken wholly at a loss in time of need.

And now, holding the remnant of his torch close to the roof of the tunnel midway its length, he took from a pocket, a couple of giant-powder cartridges, supplied with time fuses, and inserted them well into the crack which his light revealed to his gaze.

This was an expedient which he had brooded over before, and all he had to do now was to proceed along the lines so thoughtfully worked out in advance.

With the cartridges where they would do the most good, Uncle Sam touched off the fuses, then hastened back to the chamber, to be on hand to reassure his master when that explosion should take place.

It seemed a pity to rouse up that worn, aged, haggard body, but the faithful black feared still more the effects of another startling surprise, and at his gentle shake, Mayo Galloway lifted his bowed head with a startled jerk.

"Pardon, master, dear," the negro said, in soothing tones. "You were tiring yourself still more by trying to sleep in such a cramped position. I'll make your bed in a moment or two, but, first, you haven't forgotten what we agreed upon, long ago, about blowing up the tunnel?"

"The tunnel, Sam?"

"Yes, sir. In case we should be tracked here by our enemies, you know. It could be done very easily, as we agreed after making an examination, and then, too, we'd still have one method of coming and going as we liked."

"I know, but, what are you holding in reserve, boy? You're hiding something! I can see it in your eyes, and hear it in your tongue! Am I so poor, so helpless a wretch that you fear to tell me the whole truth, Uncle Sam?"

Those faithful eyes grew a bit dimmer at those harsh tones, so little merited, but he had learned to bear with the broken nerves of this, his master, the one being on earth for whom he felt love. But that love fell little short of adoration!

"Not so, master, dear; but you're so tired, so weary from your long run, that I dread—"

"Out with it, boy! There's fresh danger brewing, then?"

"Part of the old peril, master. I greatly fear

one or the other of us was dogged here to-night, and—"

"'Twas you, then! Why couldn't you have been more careful, boy, when you must have known—"

A violent explosion cut his irritable speech short.

CHAPTER XVI.

UNCLE SAM PREACHES WAR.

THE concussion of disturbed air was far more violent than had been calculated, thanks to the narrow space in which it was confined, and even the black giant was flung off his footing, striking the rock floor with a heavy shock.

But he was quick as a cat in regaining his balance, his sole care being for his master, who lay prostrate, seemingly stunned.

"Master—dear master!" he cried huskily, picking Galloway up in his arms much as an ordinary man might have attempted to soothe a frightened child. "I had to do it! We were followed here, and I had to bar the way. But I didn't—The fuses burnt out quicker than I had any idea, and—Master, speak to me!"

Under his assiduous care, Mayo Galloway was not long in rallying from that shock. Though flung with such violence to the rocks, he had received no material injury, and when he did rally, he seemed brighter, stronger, more like his former self than at any time that night.

He listened intently to Uncle Sam's explanations, and nodded his full approval at brief intervals, finally saying:

"You acted all for the best, Sam, and the only fault I can find lies in your not trusting me from the very first. Why not?"

"I hoped to spare you further anxiety, as long as possible, master," was the meek reply. "I knew how terribly your long and rough jaunt had tired you, and if the fuses hadn't been marked wrong, I would have told you all before the explosion came."

"Never mind, now. Light a torch, and let's see if the work is done perfectly, as we calculated it would be."

Together they made the tour of inspection, and after a thorough examination, Mayo Galloway was pleased to express his complete approval.

The passage was blocked so thoroughly that a rat would have found it difficult to find a way through the barricade, and their doubts set at rest on this point, master and man returned to the chamber of refuge.

Once seated there, Uncle Sam entered more into detail, telling how his suspicions were awakened, and how he had reasoned out the nearly certain fact of one or the other of them having been dogged to this hiding-place.

"Then there is but one thing for us to do," muttered Galloway, his head drooping in dejection once more. "That is, to flee still further from those pitiless demons."

"There surely is another course left open to us, master," almost timidly ventured the negro, yet inwardly resolving to have that postponed battle over before another sun came to light up that section.

"To hide here, you mean? How long could we do that? Only until lack of food or drink drove us to venture forth. And then—how much pity would Jaffray Pilkington and his vultures show us?"

"Far less than we have shown unto him and his, master!" with sudden fire in eyes and in voice. "Why should we flee like criminals, when right and justice is all on our side? Why should we not turn and fight those demons? We can do it, and win the fight, too!"

"Two against a score, and one of those two but a miserable wreck!"

"Not so, master! Or, if so, 'tis because you have wronged your own manhood by running from those lawless knaves!"

"What! you are preaching war, boy?"

"Ay! war, and that to the bitter end, master! I'd give them the blade, and the blade to the very hilt! I'd face them with right at my back, and dare them to do their worst! All I ask is your permission, dear master, and if you will grant that—"

"You'd lose me my last friend on earth, Sam!"

"Death would come cheaply, so paid for, master," tears starting from his eyes as he caught that offered hand, bending over it until his lips sent a warm thrill through that bony member. "But all the devils this side of tophet couldn't kill me before I'd made you safe, master! Only say that I may try it on!"

"If I were to give you free permission, Sam, how would you begin?" almost listlessly asked Galloway.

Long brooding over his misfortune had nearly drained him of hope and energy. He could act swift and boldly when a sudden emergency confronted him, as the fate of Big Jack Ruggles bore witness; but at all other times he was fit only for flight, for hiding, for mourning over the bitter wrongs he was too cowed to bravely resent.

"I'll try to tell you, master, but first, what good has come of our trying to keep out of trouble by flight? How many times have we settled down to what promised peace and com-

fort, only to be driven away, fleeing like criminals on whose head blood-money rested?"

"And does it not?" came the fierce interruption. "Blood-money, say you? Ayl and blood-money enough to curse a thousand like us!"

"There is a way to remove that curse, master, and—"

"By dying?" sneered the old man, his eyes glowing, his hands clinching fiercely. "Ayl! that's just what those two head devils are longing and working for! With my death, all would rest between them—all would fall to Jaffray Pilkington and Ozias Popp!"

If Uncle Sam had only known the real truth! If he had only known, what hardly another in all that region save those two, master and man, was in ignorance of! But as yet he knew not that Jaffray Pilkington had, in a quarrel, taken the life of Ozias Popp, under such atrocious circumstances that a mob exacted his life as penalty.

Still, in ignorance to that extent, the faithful fellow did his level best to carry the point which he had long felt must be their final hope; to turn at bay, and fight back, instead of idly fleeing.

"Not by dying, but by killing in self-defense, master," he said, with forced composure. "Turn at bay, which will be exactly what those demons least expect. Then, before they can do further harm, I'll kill or be laid out trying it on!"

"You could do it, if any one man, Sam," with a nod of grim approval as he glanced over that magnificent figure, now swelling with resolution, all instinct with life and dawning hope. "But they'd never meet us face to face, when a shot in the back would be so much safer!"

"I'll chance that, if you will let me try it on, master."

"And if you should contrive to—no, no, Sam! 'Tis worse than folly to even think of such a step!"

"Then, master, for the first time since we were little boys together, I'm going to disobey you—going to leave you!" said Uncle Sam, in husky yet resolute tones, as he rose to his feet like one on the point of taking his departure.

"Leave me? What do you mean, boy? Are you going crazy, sir?"

"I'd be worse than crazy were I to let matters run longer as they have been running for so many years," came the grave response. "Since you refuse me the permission I ask, I'll take it of my own accord. I'm going to find your chief enemies, sir, and if you ever look upon my face again, both Jaffray Pilkington and Ozias Popp will be out of your path forever!"

There was naught of boasting, naught of bombast in this speech, no matter how the words may appear in cold type. The black man meant each word that crossed his lips, and as he gazed, the eyes of Mayo Galloway grew dimmer. Never again would he meet with such a true nobleman!

"You could do it, too, Sam!" he ejaculated, as he sprang to his feet and grasped the giant, like one who means to check escape by using force. "Sit down, boy! You see only the one fact, while I am looking far beyond. You think that with those two devils wiped out, no further trouble could arise for us, but—Jaffray Pilkington has a son to succeed him, and hardly less to be dreaded, if all's true!"

"I have thought of that, too, master," quietly said Uncle Sam, yielding to that grasp, seating himself in his former position. "And I have studied it all out, long months ago, sir."

"Then you must see that 'twould be but leaping from pan to fire!"

"Not so, begging your pardon, master, for blunt speaking. With those two dead, all would fall to you, and that very fact would render your life sacred in the eyes of the evil gang! Can't you see it, master?"

"You mean—what do you mean, Sam?"

"That, having wasted so many weary years in useless flight, the time has come when we must turn at bay, and whip the devils out in fair fight. We can do it, if you only try to think so, master. And then—with those two head imps disposed of, as I guarantee they shall be—you must will everything to your legal heirs, and let the whole world know as much!"

"And by so doing, set other bloodhounds at my throat?" asked Galloway, with a short, bitter laugh.

"Not so, master," came the calm response. "I have not been altogether idle, of late weeks. I did not ask permission, because I knew you would refuse to grant it."

"Cool, to say the least, Sam!"

"I'll ask pardon for all, in a lump, master," with a meek bow of his head, then quickly adding: "I did not tell you what I had done, even when my actions could not be recalled, but now I'm going to tell you everything, master, dear."

"I spoke of your legal heirs. I have found them out. They are only two, brother and sister, the surviving children of your sister Marcia, who married a gentleman belonging to one of the first families of Kentucky."

"I know: Theron Fairclough was his name."

"Right, master! And now you can give a

shrewd guess why I urged you to take refuge last fall in that State: because I wanted to learn something positive concerning these, your relatives."

"But—you surely did not see them, Sam?"

"No, for Mr. Fairclough left Kentucky for New York, shortly after his marriage; but I did learn that he came of a true and noble stock. You know what your sister, Miss Marcia, was, master. Then, of such parents, could any save true and honest children spring?"

"You are right, I reckon, boy, but—go on, now you've begun. What other marvels have you contrived to hatch up while I dozed?"

There was a touch of sarcasm in his voice, but Uncle Sam bravely ignored that, for the present, feeling assured that he was acting for the best interests of his master.

"You know what a curse hangs over that money, just as I know it, dear master. And so, seeing how it all must end, I then made up my mind that I must slay, that you might live! And so—to help the end come more quickly—I wrote a long letter to the children of your dead sister, telling them part of the truth, and begging them to lose no time in coming here to Break-neck."

"The devil you did!"

"If I have acted wrongly, master, punish me as you like," and once more that proud head was meekly bowed.

"Go on, boy! You're holding something in reserve, as I can see by the glint in 'your eye,' was the cold response. "Make a clean breast of it, now you've begun your confession."

"I will, master," his hand slipping inside of his shirt, to draw a folded paper from a pocket which his own fingers had fashioned there. "I did not dare do this part of it with my own hands, master, for I was afraid of making a mistake that might ruin all, instead of saving precious time. Will you look over what's inside, sir?"

With his curiosity acutely excited, Mayo Galloway took the paper, bending closer to the little fire that its red glow might aid his vision, then opening the document, to give vent to a sharp ejaculation as he read the first words.

"Why, you—'tis a will!"

"Drawn by a regular lawyer, master. As I said, I didn't dare trust myself to do it all, but I had him leave blanks for the names, and I put them in, myself."

Smothering his emotions—strong enough, else those twin spots of feverish red would hardly have crept into his sunken cheeks—Mayo Galloway read what was there set down. As briefly as might be, with a due regard to the law and items, this paper, lacking only the signatures of testator and witnesses, was a will by which Mayo Galloway left every thing to his "beloved niece and nephew, Euid Fairclough, and Digby Fairclough, her brother."

When his eyes reached the blank space left for the signatures, he gave a short, cold nod, letting the paper fall from his hand to the floor.

"Time enough for them to fight over my remains when I'm dead, boy!"

"You refuse to sign this, master? Then there's only one course left open for me to take; I'll go kill your two chief enemies before I look upon your face again, master!"

"And be lynched for your trouble, boy?"

CHAPTER XVII.

SIR STEEL BREAKS THE RECORD.

"Yip! yip! yip!"

Sbrilling forth the cowboy yell, the drug-crazed sport slackened lines and gave both span the silk. The deftly handled lash gave forth a succession of spiteful cracks, at each one biting keen as the sting of an angry hornet.

Frightened and tortured, the team plunged ahead, crossing those few feet of level ground, then beginning the sharp descent known far and wide as Break-neck Chute, partly for the mining-town which lay only a short distance ahead, but more on account of its own natural perils.

Never before this night had a driver even attempted to make that descent without first carefully looking to his brake, his brake-shoes, his drag-chains, all the safeguards possible under dangerous circumstances. And it was this fact that enabled Steel Surry to so easily impose upon poor Joram Lippertoe.

How could he suspect that even a crazy man would catch at such a terrible method of committing suicide?

"Holy—fer love o'—don't!" he panted, almost losing his voice in his consternation.

His first impulse was to regain whip and lines, and one set of fingers did close upon the arm nearest him; to feel the flesh hard as marble, the sinews like tempered wire! And then he realized how worse than helpless he was, with death staring them all in the face!

Even if he might hope to overcome that madman by main strength, what would it avail him, or his unfortunate passengers? Long before such a victory could be won, that heavy vehicle would have gained such an impetus as to be wholly beyond control of man or beast, even if it was not hurled to ruin at the dreaded curve midway that descent!

"God fergive— Hold on, everybody!"

His last words rose in a shrill cry, answering back the confused sounds which came from the interior of the coach. The penned-in passengers could no longer mistake their terrible risk, but they, too, were utterly powerless to help or hinder.

"Walk along, my dandies!" cried the locoed sport, making his whip crackle and snap like a bunch of fire-crackers. "Through on time, or this establishment can't advertise in the *Herald*! Cheer up, Horace? I'm Hank Monk, and Mark Twain don't even begin to— Lively, lads! It's haste to the wedding, and if we don't get there, what'll the gay and gallant band do for spirits? Spirits black, and spirits gray, spirits— Hark, from the tombs a doleful sound!"

If not from thence, at least sounds anything but cheerful were coming from the stage interior. And Joram Lippertoe, too, was not so badly frightened but what he could attempt to make his advice heard.

"H'ar back, boss, an' keep lines tight! Stiddy 'em afore we hit the goose-neck, or— Hold 'em stiddy, boss!"

At first the only peril seemed to lie in the abrupt descent itself, and if a vehicle could be so hampered as to require straightened tugs, or merely an ordinary amount of holding back on part of its team, all that seemed necessary was a head clear enough and hands strong enough to keep the team moving straight.

But when that descent was half-made, the real peril was to be found. At that point came the "goose-neck," which was a fairly sharp bend in the trail, where a towering mass of solid rock forbade the idea of cutting or blasting the road wider.

Once past this curve, the trail led straight to the level on which Break-neck was built, wide enough at nearly every foot of the way for teams to pass each other, if cautiously driven.

"Stiddy goes, and I'm in the saddle!" recklessly laughed the mad athlete, but stinging his leaders with the lash instead of trying to hold them in. "Clear the way, all ye who have aught breakable about your regimentals or in your compositions! Here we come! The Flying Dutchman, ghostly crew, and boatswain, too! Only the captain solid flesh and blood, and he's been supping on devil's broth until— Pitch or toss, heads or tail, whether we make the turn, or take a tumble to glory all in a heap!"

Joram Lippertoe closed his eyes, bowed his head, gripping the iron rail with a vigor born of despair.

Just ahead of them lay that dreaded bend. High on the right hand towered that flinty cliff, worn smooth near its base by the close "hugging" it had received by wayfarers, climbing up or going down. Close to the left lay a fall so abrupt as to almost form an abyss, with rough and jagged rocks thickly strewn its dangerous slope.

Little hope for those who should be cast upon their mercies: and what else could await those helpless beings now?

Even Sir Steel seemed in some measure affected by that sense of great peril, for his reckless laugh died away, his voice ceased to rant and mock, his arms drew back until the ribbons were stretched taut as iron rods.

It was beyond mortal power to check that furious flight down such a steep incline, but the Sport from Sunrise did better than to attempt such an impossibility; he regained sufficient control of his frightened team to guide them close along that inner curve, then flung one leg over and past Lippertoe, to catch the brake with his high heel, bringing the leather-shod shoes to bear on the hind wheels, as he soothingly cried to the boys:

"So-ho! steady, my beauties! Steady—steady, now!"

Joram took one glance, as Sir Steel leaned heavily against him, to help keep their balance as the coach spun around that sharp curve. He saw those swiftly revolving wheels with their hubs seemingly grazing that wall of rock, and knowing that even a single touch would surely end in their being hurled far down that ugly slope, an utter wick, he sealed his lids once more, too badly scared to even utter a gasp.

"Steady! Steady goes, and so do we! Who says rats? Who says we're snails, content to creep when flying comes just as cheap, and a mighty sight more interesting! Climb, ye sinners! The day's work is done, and home looms up yonder like—there's a light in the window for me!"

"Glory to—ef ye hain't done it, I'm a liar!" spluttered Joram Lippertoe, opening his eyes, to see that the "goose-neck" was a peril of the past, and they were dashing swiftly down the last stretch, with only smooth sailing before them, unless a horse should trip, or something give way about the stage itself.

"Lie not, lest ye be lain on, ob, ye of less than little faith!" the mad driver ranted, mingling his words with the swift reports sent out by that deftly handled whip. "Hearken unto those wails and lamentations from the bowels of this, our gallant ark! Spirits in sea-sick misery! And only the small sum of one dime! Only a petty ten-cent piece to study the awful mysteries of supernatural nature, gathered together now for the first time by— Buy ye my sweet

posies, master? Pity me, for I've never a mother to— Hold fast my bonnet, Nancy! For, I want to be an angel, and with Mulligan Guards, on deck ahoy! Light on the starboard quarter—that's a lie, for the small bills say only ten cents for both shows and— What's the matter with you, Johnny?"

The level was reached, and as the crazy sport still plied his whip, now to sting the jaded horses instead of merely cutting the air, Jotham Lippertoe ventured to grasp an arm with a panting expostulation. Only to be thrust back with a force that nearly sent him headlong from the box, and before he could fairly rally, they were thundering along the main street of Break-neck!

From inside the stage came angry sounds, but without paying the slightest heed to these, Sir Steel drove direct to the office of Wells, Fargo & Co., where the stage invariably made its first halt, reining in with a shrill whoop of triumph; then tossing lines and whip to the bewildered Lippertoe, he sprang nimbly to the ground and vanished from view among the shadows and the rapidly gathering crowd.

"Don't ye talk to me, critters!" spluttered Lippertoe, as questions were flung at him through half a dozen pair of lips. "We've come down the Chute 'bout drag, lock or brake! Come down on the keen jump, an' yit—be we 'live, or is this glory station?"

"It's an infernal shame! And if there's any law or justice to be had in town, I'll—" raged Digby Fairclough, dashing open the door of the coach, his angry speech cut short by the sudden starting of the still frightened horses, which nearly flung him forward upon his face.

But he quickly regained his balance, and looking toward the box-seat, he cried:

"Where's that drunken—Gone!"

"You shet, or climb me!" sharply cried Joram, instantly in arms. "Ef it hedn't 'a' bin fer Sir Steel, whar'd you be right now, I want to know? Didn't he hold 'em level gwine down the Chute? An' didn't he do what's never bin done afore, nur won't never be done ag'in? Didn't he— Oh, boss, you make me sleepy!"

Possibly, had the sport been visible, just then, young Fairclough would have done his level best to play even for those moments of torture, during which he felt that death alone awaited his sister and himself. But Steel Surry had vanished, and as the curious crowd began to gather closer, he yielded to the call of Enid, and sullenly entered the coach again.

"It's poor work kicking up a row over what's past, young gentleman," said Alfred Kindred. "Remember that poor Surry is not accountable for his actions to-night. Now—of course, you want to go to a hotel?"

"If there is such a place, yes. As for that madman—"

"He is a madman, for the time being, and so deserving pity and aid, rather than harsh words, sir," retorted the merchant, stepping from the coach, to call up to Lippertoe: "Drive the lady and gentleman to Deakin's place, Lippertoe, please."

"To the Tip top House? Co-rect! G'lang, ye beauties! Git out o' the way, feller-critters, ef ye don't want to be trompled to glory by the onliest team as ever flew a hearse down Break-neck Chute 'bout so much as a rotten cobweb fer a drag!"

With a lusty cheer, such of the citizens as had congregated to welcome the belated stage, hurried after the vehicle, having heard just enough to make them anxious for more. Something out of the ordinary run had surely transpired, and they would not rest happy until they had learned it all.

Brief as was the time it took to land them safely at the front of the Tip-top House, owned and run by Elias Deakin and his good wife Nancy, Digby Fairclough had improved those moments so well that when he alighted, to assist his sister, he was outwardly calm and collected. Yet there was an ominous gleam in his blue eyes as they swiftly roved over the faces of those there gathered.

If he was looking for Steel Surry, disappointment once more awaited him, for the sport was invisible.

With Enid, closely veiled and leaning heavily on his arm, Fairclough hastened into the hotel, curtly bidding the fat landlord show them at once to a private room, where they could remove the dust of travel, and discuss their supper in peace and quietude.

"You will not—you don't mean to—to quarrel with him, dear brother?" tremblingly asked Enid, when they were left alone together.

"He'd ought to have every bone in his drunken carcass broken!" was the stern reply. "Think of how he raced us down that steep! No thanks to him that we weren't killed!"

"He was—you know what they said, brother. He had been driven crazy by drugs, and—"

"Stop, sister! You are not one to defend such a brute!"

"Not for him, but for your sake, brother," her arms clasping about his neck as her head pressed to his bosom. "Promise me you will not quarrel with him, Digby, dear?"

"Enid, look up!" at the same time lifting her face by a hand beneath her chin. "Surely,

one would almost think you in love with that scoundrel!"

Her face flushed warmly, and her eyes dropped before his glowing gaze. But only for a single breath. Then, firmly meeting his gaze, the maiden spoke, lowly but steadily:

"So I might have been, brother, only for—I could have learned to love him dearly, only for you!"

"I'd rather see you dead and in your coffin, Enid! What! you love that gambling, drinking, reckless blow-hard? And after what you have experienced this very evening, you can speak such words!"

"He was drugged, poor fellow!"

"Drugged? Only a whisky-maddened brute could have acted thus!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPORT FROM SUNRISE.

DIGBY FAIRCLOUGH spoke with bitter fierceness, and releasing his sister, almost thrust her from him.

She caught at the back of a chair, into which she sunk, bowing her head and covering her face with her trembling hands.

Touched by this sight, for with all his faults, Digby Fairclough loved his sister passionately, the young man stepped to her side, a caressing hand touching her bent head, as he spoke more moderately:

"I didn't mean to be so rude, Enid, but—I just couldn't help it! I thought that rascal had forever passed out of our lives, and now—"

"You will not quarrel with him, brother?"

There was a brief hesitation, then came the answer:

"Not unless he should force it upon me, since you ask it, Enid. He was about the last person on earth I expected to meet in this remote spot, but even if I had counted on encountering him, such outrageous conduct is far worse than I could have looked for!"

"They said—you, yourself, admitted—"

"That I failed to detect any actual scent of liquor, but what else could it have been? While he may not have been drinking for a few hours, his actions and words surely were those of a wretch on the very verge of delirium tremens. Then, that mad drive!"

"The horses were spirited. They may have broken from control before he thought to—"

"Enid, I hate to hear you even try to defend Steel Surry! If I did not know better, I could still think you in love with him!"

Almost without thinking, Fairclough repeated his words of a few moments before, and Enid came very near doing the same.

"I might have learned to love him, Digby, if you hadn't—"

"If I hadn't torn off his mask in time! That's enough, sister," as he drew back toward the door. "I'll see to having supper brought to the rooms assigned us, as soon as I have registered."

Without waiting for further speech, the young man left the parlor, and after registering, made his wishes known to the landlord.

"Wife's gittin' things ready, squire," was the brisk reply. "I'll jest show ye the way up, an' then—this way, sir!"

There was quite a little gathering in the office, and as he turned away, Fairclough caught the sound of Sir Steel's name, but he did not wait to hear more, just then.

The accommodations afforded by the Tip-top House were about on a par with those usually to be found in all mining-towns of recent birth. The chambers were small, scantily furnished, but, thanks to good Mrs. Deakin, were kept neat and clean.

By the time they had washed, supper was brought up, and seated together in the room assigned to Enid, brother and sister made a very creditable meal, particularly as they found the hot coffee of a vastly better quality than they had chanced across since beginning their long and wearisome journey.

As by mutual consent, they avoided further mention of Steel Surry, though it was hardly to be expected that either of them could so readily banish all thoughts of the one who had given them such a strange, thrilling experience that evening.

Naturally enough, their conversation touched principally upon the object of that same journey, though much of their talk would hardly have been intelligible to one lacking the right key to its meaning.

"You saw no one, then, Digby, while in the office?" asked Enid.

"No one, to know him, that is. There were two or three looking at the register, and our man may have been among them. If so, he'll be on the lookout when I go down again."

"I wonder—"

"I've been wondering pretty much ever since that strange letter came," said the young man, with a short, forced laugh, as his sister hesitated to complete her sentence. "And more than all else, how I could have been so credulous as to undertake such a trip, on such flimsy evidence!"

"Then you fear—it may all be a hoax, Digby?"

"It can't all be a hoax, since we know that mother did have a brother named Mayo. But

whether or no there is any better foundation to the silly hopes we— Pahl!" with an impatient gesture. "Don't talk of it any more, Enid! I'm growing sick and sorry, both!"

The meal was finished in almost utter silence, and then, while preparing the dishes on the tray for removal, Fairclough said:

"I'm going down-stairs, now, to see what may turn up. You'd better go to bed, sis, so—good-night!"

"Good-night, dear. And if you should happen to meet—"

"I have promised, Enid, so don't mention it further," came the cold interruption, and picking up the tray, Fairclough left the chamber.

He carried the tray down-stairs, smiling involuntarily as he did so, for he thought of what would be said, back East, could their acquaintances see him under such guise.

"I'd never hear the last of their jokes, but—Enid mustn't be disturbed. Poor girl! she's had a tough trip of it! And to end with such a— Confound the fellow! can't I get him out of my mind?"

Fairclough was hardly equal to playing the role of waiter so far as to carry that tray into the office, and as the parlor was the only other portion of the establishment with which he had formed acquaintance, he deposited his burden on the chintz covered lounge of home-manufacture, then passed along to the office.

Almost the first thing he heard was the name of the reckless sport, even as it had been in his ears while leaving the office shortly before. Fairclough frowned, but he had a purpose in paying that visit, and would not let this drive him back.

He passed over to the desk, paying no heed to the curious looks with which his coming was greeted. He glanced at the open register, but the names of himself and sister were the last on that page, and as he gazed blankly at them, he felt at a loss what step to take next.

He had come to Break-neck to meet or be met by—some person; but just who that person was to be, he had no means of knowing. And now that his destination was reached, this odd fact struck him far more forcibly—it might be put disagreeably—than ever.

His wandering gaze rested upon a small array of bottles and glassware within that rude railing, and an idea flashed across his brain, no doubt born of what he had read concerning western towns and their bibulous population.

"Gentlemen," he said, with a bow which comprised all present, "as the noted governor said to his worthy colleague, 'it's a long time between drinks!' Will you kindly join me?"

A general acceptance of that invitation seemed to confirm his brilliant idea, and after the fat host had served all who came forward, Fairclough lit a cigar, leaning carelessly back, with elbows supported by the railing, his feet crossed, the personification of elegant ease.

His first desire was to have tongues wag freely, knowing what a wide range such chat will take when encouraged; and then, if the particular point in which he was interested should not turn up of its own accord, he would be in a better position to give that talk the desired trend.

"You were busy talking when I came in, gentlemen. Don't let me interfere, I beg of you. Though I'm what you'd doubtless call a tenderfoot, just from the far East, I'm not readily shocked."

"Or you wouldn't 'a' perked up so mighty quick a'ter comin' down the Chute!" chuckled one of the company.

"Did he just turn things wide open, stranger, the way Lippertoe said?" asked another. "Didn't the old man kinder stretch it, eh?"

"Well, we did come down the slope at a fair jog," coolly nodded the tenderfoot. "Isn't that according to rule, though? I supposed it was the regular thing, and so didn't take much notice of particulars."

"The reg'lar— Good Lawd!"

"Never another soul but the Sport from Sunrise did, could, would, or ever will make the trip that way!"

"Indeed! And this—what did you call him?"

"Steel Surry, Sir Steel, the Sport from Sunrise; take your choice of the lot, stranger, and no matter which one you 'light onto, you'll get your money's worth, with plenty flung in to make good measure!"

"Waal, I should remark!"

"You bet your sweet life, now!"

"Member the time them stray sharps roped little Josey into thar skin game? Cleaned him out o' every red, then wanted to end up by peelin' off his hide fer gloves! But in comes the sport, an'—waal, when the circus was over, the sharps was laid out fer mendin', Josey hed his pile back ag'in, with all them pizen critters hed bring to town, added to it fer good measure!"

This reminiscence brought another to the front, and that led up to a third incident, in all of which the Sport from Sunrise, as Steel Surry appeared to be popularly known in Break-neck, figured prominently, to his own credit and his friends' profit.

As may be imagined, this sort of chatter was hardly agreeable to young Fairclough, disliking the hero as he did, and seeing the difficulty he would find in turning the subject toward his

own secret wishes he turned once more to the register, a scrap of paper containing a signature hidden in his free hand, turning over the dog-eared pages with the other, looking for a name or writing which would tally with that resting in his palm.

But he found nothing which could give him the desired clue, and as he could hardly ask if any one present could direct him where to find "A True Friend," he slipped that bit of paper into his pocket, then availed himself of the first opportunity which offered, to break away from that uncongenial companionship.

Still, as a forlorn hope, he spoke to the landlord in tones sufficiently loud for all in the office to catch:

"Reckon I'll take a bit of a stroll through your town, landlord. If any one should happen in to ask for me—my name is there, Digby Fairclough, from New York City—please beg him to wait for me. I'll be back soon."

"All right, sir," said Elias Deakin, with a cheerful nod. "Ef any gent calls, be sure I'll tell him."

"Digby Fairclough, you know," repeated the young man.

"Not a name to forgit easy, sir, but ef I should, I've got your fist—an' a turrible purty one 'tis, too!—right hyar on my book."

Fairclough glanced quickly around the room. All eyes were fixed upon him, as was natural, but there came no sign of recognition, no open or covert signal such as he longed for.

The unknown writer, on whose unsupported word he had brought his sister so far, clearly could not be among that number, and with a deepening sense of disgust at the supreme folly which he had and was displaying, the young man left the hotel for the outer air.

"'Twould have been bad enough had I come alone," he muttered, as he moved leisurely down the principal street, with no particular end in view, "but to bring her! And on the strength of an anonymous note! Digby Fairclough, you're a natural born idiot!"

Possibly because he felt that such an idiot was unfit company for even total strangers, Fairclough showed no desire or inclination for forming acquaintance with any one, glancing idly in through the open doors of saloons and gaming-halls as he passed by.

"They run things wide open in Break-neck!" was one of his mental comments, followed by the moral: "But, after all, how much worse is that, than to fleece a victim behind locks and bars, as they do at home?"

Once his steps were arrested, even to turning back for a second glance through that open doorway. He caught a voice which sounded remarkably like that of Steel Surry, as he recalled it.

He was mistaken, as that second glance proved, but this was sufficient to turn his thoughts more closely upon the man whom all Break-neck seemed to honor, after its western fashion.

"The Sport from Sunrise, eh? The Sport from Bedlam, rather! I never liked him, even before I found out how he was prowling around—confound his impudence for that, if no more!"

Irritation hastened his steps, and without paying much attention to whither those steps led him, Fairclough fairly ran his head into a very pretty little adventure, almost before he knew it.

Attracted to an open door by a loud uproar, he paused on the steps, to take note of a really remarkable spectacle.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DRUG-TORTURED BRAIN.

ALTHOUGH he could hardly have given a reason for so doing, if asked, Steel Surry hastened away from that little gathering in front of the Express Office, before a question could fairly be put to him.

As Alfred Kindred was even then saying, the poor fellow was not accountable for his actions while under the strange influence of that noxious drug.

He went with a rush for a short while, then came to an abrupt halt, clasping both hands to his temples, muttering to himself:

"Whoa, turn-around! There she comes—goes—gone! Watch your chance, old man, and make a grab at it—didn't I tell you so?"

Making a quick clutch with his curved fingers, the drugged sport gave a chuckling sound of grim satisfaction as he resumed his rapid walk, holding that closed hand up in front of his face as though examining or making a study of some curious object.

"A piece o' mind, eh? I've often heard tell of such a thing, but this is the first time I clapped two eyes— He who proclaims himself wise on the highway, bath a fool for a bedfellow when he sleepeth all alone!"

With a gesture of self-scorn, Sir Steel smote his own chest with that opening hand, but he had caught the lost idea, and that gesture did not cast it entirely away.

He pressed on with steadier step and more natural air, accosting a man who was squatting on his heels, with bowed back braced against the front of a little shanty near the western limits of Break-neck.

"I say, Robert the Majors! Put up my good steel yet?"

"Eh? Which?"

"My kingdom for a— Hold on, me! I say, old fellow, our nag has come home, hasn't it?"

"Meanin' Dandy Doc, boss? Why, you don't mean fer to say that the blame critter give ye a up-sot, do ye?"

"Mean?" echoed Surry, brushing a hand across his brows, as an unsteady step brought him against the corner of the cabin for support. "Mean don't begin to express this sensation, pardner! I feel as though I'd been— What's gone wrong with this universe, anyway?"

Majors edged a little further away from Sir Steel, though his suspicions evidently included nothing worse than a bit too much strong drink. His thoughts were more nearly connected with his horse, however, and he again asked if Dandy Doc had thrown his temporary owner.

"Thrown? I feel as though I'd been riding a comet through the Milky Way! And—you say he hasn't come home, then?"

"I hain't seed hide nur ha'r of him, but—"

He checked himself as he saw the sport thrusting a hand into his breast pocket, to produce a well-filled wallet.

"For the life of me, Majors, I can't remember what I did with the brute, but—name your terms, and if I can't cover it with rustling cash, I'll go tackle the nearest tiger and— How much?"

"Two-fifty's my price, boss, but I wouldn't—"

"He who will not when he may, when he wishes he had, gets left!" the sport mis-quoted, thrusting a number of bills into that reluctant hand. "Count it, noble pardner! Write a receipt upon your stable door, and if Dandy Doc comes back on his own footing, tickle him in the short-ribs, and bid him cancel the debt with his heels!"

"But, I say, boss!" spluttered Majors, then breaking off with a bewildered grunt as he stared open-mouthed after that swiftly receding figure. "Drunk, an' the dug-gundest funny drunk I ever see!"

He had fair grounds for that thought, too, since the sport came to an abrupt right-about, retracing his steps as swiftly as he had made them, bringing up in front of the fellow with a military salute.

"Forgot something, Robert! I paid you, didn't I?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"I thought as much—thanks. Then Dandy Doc is mine, be he worth more or less, as the case may be! If he should happen to come back to his old home, Robert, oblige me by treating him white, and if not too much trouble, just ask the dear fellow where we've been, and what the devil we've been doing?"

"Ef I didn't know—"

"You'd be under the painful necessity of learning, Robert, and that would be terrible! Don't I know? Haven't I just taken a lesson more bitter—bitters—who shouted?" giving his head a backward toss, and flashing a glance around them. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but I never indulge!"

He started off once more, paying no further attention to the completely puzzled fellow who had just sold a horse which neither seller nor buyer could locate.

Like Digby Fairclough, somewhat later, Sir Steel seemed wandering at random through the town, casting occasional glances through open doors, but taking no note, even if he really saw aught. That drug was still working on his brain, and when it steered him into a favorite resort for the sports of Break-neck, Steel Surry had so slight control of his wits that he almost indignantly rejected the cordial greeting:

"Hellow, sport! Come in an' hit the bottle, Sir Steel!"

"Avant, base varlet! Who art thou to—Way, make way for the King of the Cannibal Islands! And thou—uncover, dog!"

A swift stroke knocked the hat off the head of the flashily dressed fellow who had given that greeting, but he joined in the laugh which greeted that supposed jest.

"Uncover goes, but don't stick your hoof through it, oh, king!" he laughed, making a dive for his property, only to see it sent whirling to the ceiling, by the foot of the crazed sport.

Without paying further attention to the fellow, Sir Steel strode across to the bar, leaning forward to utter in a theatrical whisper:

"Hast thou cold infant on tap, varlet?"

"Anything you call for, Surry," was the smiling response.

"Trot it forth, then, and the nearer Maud S. you can come, the better I'll feel 'way down in my equatorial region! If I over— Ha!" with a start and an angry scowl as decanter and glass were placed before him by the bland barkeeper. "What is this I see before me?"

"Cold infant, your Majesty, just imported, and I reckon—"

Sir Steel caught up the decanter, giving it a fierce shake, then glaring at the bright beads which sparkled before the lamp-light. Only for a moment. Then he hurled it through the open doorway, with an oath.

"Devil's broth! My brain is boiling over with the infernal brew already! The man who

offers—offers—I'm offering double price for a fat baby! I'm King of the Cannibal Islands, and under a solemn vow to fast until I can—canned, you say?" whirling upon the barkeeper, with an expression of supreme disgust coming into his pale face.

"I merely asked if I should charge it, Mr. Surry. The decanter, you know. Not that it matters a whit, only I didn't know—thanks!"

Sir Steel flipped a gold coin upon the bar, then turned away without waiting for change or further speech. That action brought his face squarely toward the faro lay-out further down that long room, and he stalked forward, a new idea coming to the surface as he saw the slowly dealing cards, the shifting money, the players, who were far too deeply interested in their game to have been disturbed by what had transpired in the saloon proper.

"A painted board, with a knave on one side, and fools on the other!" solemnly croaked the crazy sport, folding his arms and gazing sternly at the table from beneath his gathered brows. "Beat that for a terse definition of ye noble game of faro, ye who think ye know how!"

The dealer gave a little nod of recognition as he glanced up, and one unlucky player, who had seen his last wager raked across to the wrong side of the board, rose from his seat and offered the chair to the sport, whom every one seemed to know.

"Take my place, Sir Steel, if you're not afraid I've left a hoodoo in the chair as a cushion. I'm strapped for the night!"

"Thanks, dear boy!" bowed Surry, with a bland smile, as he accepted the proffered position. "I'm a mascot against which never a hoodoo can stand, and to prove it—first bet goes to you for the privilege."

He dropped a bank-note on the lay-out, seemingly at random, even before the dealer was through shuffling the cards for a fresh deal, his lip curling in a half-malicious smile as the unusual action called odd glances his way.

"What's the use of being a mascot at all, if you can't give odds and a beating, gentlemen? All set, and the tiger can show his teeth for my forceps. I'm coming for you, red-hot, pardner!"

"Good as wheat, sport!" nodded the dealer, with a smile. "I've been adding to the boodle expressly for your visit."

"Tally one!" chuckled Surry, as the very first turn showed him a winner. "Yours, pardner, for the privilege. And now, my angel, here's a snatch on my own hook!"

"Money talks, Mr. Surry," a little more coldly said the dealer, as his eyes sunk to the box from which he was dealing.

"And the hint goes! Pardon, gentlemen, for letting my clapper get away with my good sense."

With that brief apology for breaking the rule held sacred by all reputable players, Sir Steel devoted himself to the business in hand.

If he was betting at random, none of those at hand were aware of the fact, and those few who had credited him with having been drinking too freely, soon lost that notion as they noted his really wonderful streak of good luck. For hardly a bet but what proved a winner for the sport, and he made an unusually large number of them, at times having nearly half a score waiting decision.

His boast of being a mascot seemed in a fair way to prove true, and as wager after wager was paid over, even the dealer began to regard this recklessly cool gamester with something akin to superstition.

"You're in marvelous form this evening, sir," he said, as the deal came to an end with a successful "call of the turn."

"Pray, don't begin to think that way so early," blandly said Sir Steel, then turning his head as a timid touch on the shoulder betokened a wish for a word from behind. "Well, stranger?" he asked, as his gaze fell upon a bloated, unshaven face.

"Ef you'd jest gi' me a stake, boss," whiningly whispered the bummer, licking his cracked lips as he covetously eyed that pile of gold and bills before the player. "I hain't had a square meal fer so long that my teeth hev growed longer— Thank'ee, boss!"

His whine rose to a hoarse chuckle of delight as Sir Steel picked up some coins at random, to hold them back over a shoulder. But before his unsteady fingers could fairly close upon the glittering prize, another grimy paw made a snatch at them, and between the two, the money was knocked to the floor, where the rascals tangled themselves up in a writhing heap in their struggle for the wealth.

Laughing shrilly at their gymnastics, Sir Steel caught up a handful of his winnings and cast it into the air, to fall where it might.

CHAPTER XX.

AN EXAMPLE, NOT A PATTERN.

INSTANTLY or so was clapped to a crazy confusion, for as gold clinked upon the sanded floor, and bank-notes floated hither and yon, nearly everybody who could, made a wild dash for a share of the spoils.

Sir Steel, laughing shrilly as he noted that ludicrous scramble, where human beings

wallowed and struggled like wild beasts, gathered up the remaining winnings, and whenever there seemed to be a lack of money for those furious wrestlers, he added to the confusion by casting forth another shower.

This was the strange scene upon which Digby Fairclough gazed as that uproar drew him to the threshold, and as he caught sight of the mad sport, he entered the saloon.

"Free for all, and go as you please!" cried the reckless Sport from Sunrise, as, half-sitting on the edge of the faro-table, he scattered his money. "The best man wins, and he whose fingers can shed the most glue, rakes in the boodle! Fight, ye kittens! Yowl ye cats! Split the heavens, ye tiger-cubs! I'd do the same, if I didn't have on my Sunday-go-to-meetings, or if it wasn't more fun to play Jupiter than to act Danae o' the golden shower!"

Truly, it was a curious scene, and one which was far more befitting "the days of old, the days of gold," when men went wild in the flush times of Golden California, than these more gasping times of ours.

Men who are far above the want of money, and whose cheeks would flush with shame when time was given them for sober reflection, joined in that mad scramble, crazy as the poorest bummer of the lot. And Sir Steel laughed long and loud as he kept adding to those apples of discord.

Digby Fairclough, by this time fairly within the limits assigned to the gaming-tables, stared in amaze, more at that flushed, excited face, than at the mad confusion its owner was causing.

Already the greater part of his winnings had been disposed of after this fashion, and the rest would speedily have followed, had not a burly, roughly clad fellow, who had fared poorly in that mob, made a bold grasp at the money which Sir Steel still retained, held loosely in his left hand, hoarsely crying:

"They don't need it, an' I do, boss! Gimme—"

From laughter to rage proved but a single step, and first striking down that thieving paw, Surry cast away the money, to clutch the fellow by his throat, giving him a savage shake as he thundered:

"Ye would, would ye? Well—now you've got it, dog!"

Shifting his grip, to catch the would-be thief about the middle, Surry jerked him from his footing despite his struggles, heaving him almost at arms' length above his head, giving a fierce, wild laugh as he strode across the room to where a window broke the white-washed side wall.

Though the night was by no means cool, the sash was down, and a board shutter was closed from the outside.

Straight at this the rascal was hurled, feet foremost, and with a cry of terror he burst through glass, sash and shutter, disappearing from sight of all those who stared in mute amazement.

It was a remarkable exhibition of physical might, and even Digby Fairclough could not entirely refrain from joining in the wild cheer which greeted this summary punishment of attempted theft.

But Steel Surry did not join in, or even seem to hear, that wild applause. His hands came back to clasp his brows with that old, dazed gesture. He stared dizzily around for a brief space, then, with an almost fierce toss of his head, he strode toward the saloon.

He was followed by the majority, for by this time that unexpected harvest had been gleaned, and though they could hardly expect another such windfall, few of those present but wished to see the end of that crazy outburst.

Among so many it was not difficult for Digby Fairclough to escape recognition, but his shrinking back was labor spent in vain. Just then, poor Surry was in no fit condition for recognizing his best friend, let alone one who had proved himself a bitter enemy in the days gone by, when other interests had brought them together.

And yet, to the outward eye, Sir Steel seemed more like his usual self than he had been at any moment since that infernal draught passed his lips, back in the hills.

The principal difference lay in his grave, unsmiling countenance, as he rested one arm on the bar, casting a glance over the faces of those who crowded after his steps.

The smile which habitually lighted up those strong features was lacking now, and one who saw him for the first time, would never have believed that grave, dignified, almost sorrowful being could have taken part in that crazily fantastic scene of a few minutes before.

"Gentlemen all!" he said, in deep yet musical tones, as his free hand dropped a bank-note upon the bar. "Since I helped kick up all that dust, in yonder, I beg the privilege of washing it from your throats. My dear sir, will you attend?"

"Whooray fer the Sport from Sunrise!" cried one tattered relic of that furious scramble. "Do it full jestic, pards, fer we'll never run up ag'inst his ekil ag'in! 'Cause why: the molds was busted!"

Gravely Steel Surry doffed his hat and bowed before that storm of cheers. If he had been

popular in Break-neck before, this night's work would make him a public idol when it became generally known.

To decline an invitation from those lips, thus given, would have seemed little less than blasphemy in their estimation, and of them all, only Digby Fairclough hung back. Luckily for him, the crowd was large enough to hide his defection.

Sir Steel was with the crowd, but hardly of them, in any sense. A glass was placed before him, but he deftly turned it bottom upward, one hand resting upon it while the others filled and gave him a united toast.

"To the whitest man that ever struck Break-neck! Down it, boys!"

When that enthusiastic cheer died away, Steel Surry, his face graver than ever, lifted his unsullied glass, still bottom upward, holding it where all eyes could see.

"Good Lawd, mates!" gasped one of the crowd, staring aghast. "We was in sech a hurry to make durned hogs o' ourselves, that we never give the boss a chance fer to fill his own glass!"

"One word, gentlemen," cried the sport, in deep tones, lifting his free hand to command attention. "Every man to his own taste, is a very good motto for ordinary use, and my taste doesn't turn toward such vile poison as the majority of you seem to relish so greatly. I did not drink with you, and though a thousand strong men had tried to force me that far, they surely must have failed!"

"But—you axed us to—"

"Not I, who now am speaking, but the foul fiend who has won temporary possession of my body this bitter black night! 'Twas Satan whose voice ye heard, and I'm weeping tears of blood when I recall how many of you not only yielded to temptation, but actually seemed to like it!"

Although spoken with such a grave, even sad face and tone, this unfortunate turn sounded far too much like an adroit jest for sobriety. Sir Steel waited until that laugh subsided, then, with a growing touch of wildness in his glittering eyes, he spoke again:

"Behold, oh, ye bibbers of wine! Gaze upon him to whom the power has descended—the power wielded by those apostles of old, when drunkenness cursed almost every home, and filled every jail and prison to overflowing! Behold, for never again will you witness such a combination of Christian truth, eloquence, brotherly love and—all the rest of it!"

His voice grew unsteady, and a hand rose to brush the growing damp from his brows. The spirit was falling him, just when he hoped to exert it for the common good, and in place of the sermon he meant to preach, this exhibition bade fair to prove but a little less amusing than the one so recently afforded through his winnings at faro.

"Drink! I? Oh, ye blind idolators of the loathly worm! Oh, ye bibbers of wine and guzzlers of forty-rod! See ye not that 'tis the shade of good old Father Matthew that stands before ye, as a beacon-light? Kuow ye not that John B. Gough, Francis Murphy, Frances Willard, Susan B., and all of that pure and glorious host, now stands before you, rolled up in one hide?"

"Whooray fer the hull combination, anyway!"

"Another too-full whisky-keg started a hoop! Do ye laugh, poor, benighted heathen, when the proper cue called for tears of pity? And yet, laugh while ye may, for the night is coming fast, and when Satan shovels ye into his hottest furnace, tears may help dim the fury of the flames!"

"And straight to Tophet are ye all headed, my poor sinners! Don't I know? Haven't I journeyed along the same awful road! And so I say unto ye, fellow sinners! Not as I do, but as I advise ye! I am not setting myself up before your eyes on a pinnacle as a pattern, but as an example! An example? Ay! and one whose utter wretchedness ought to move even Lucifer to pity!"

"Do ye stare? At what? Because my tongue is trying to pour forth a single drop of the ocean of wretchedness that has engulfed my soul? Because I am baring my bosom for your eyes to take warning from?"

"And yet—to what awful degree was I a sinner? Did I lie down beside a full barrel, with the spigot turned, and the nozzle between my thirsty lips? Did I wrap myself around a jug, a bottle, even?"

"No! Of none of these excesses was I guilty, for I took but a single drink, and that was not born of the worm! Not a drop of liquor, so-called, was in that cup! And yet—to what has it brought me?"

"Then I was a man, in heart and soul, in brain and action! Now—I am worse than a fool, because I persist in playing it when I know far better!"

The crowd forgot to laugh, now. Wild, incoherent though his speech might be, even the most obtuse among them all, could not help but realize in some degree how terribly in earnest was the being who had given them such a fantastic exhibition that evening.

His pale face was contorted with misery, his eyes seemed sunken far into their orbits, his

hands trembled violently, even as his figure swayed unsteadily on his feet.

If ever mortal man suffered, Steel Surry was suffering then! And yet—surely 'twas all a grim jest?

So the majority reasoned, but there were a few who felt differently, and one of that small number was Digby Fairclough. From hating, he was beginning to feel sympathy, but before he could make up his mind to interfere, one of the company spoke up, half seriously:

"A body'd think you was dead earnest, sport, if they didn't know better!"

"I am in dead earnest, Heaven knows!" almost fiercely.

"Then—why don't ye switch off, Surry?"

"Why?" echoed the crazy sport. "Because I can't! Satan's at the throttle, and the air-brakes are broken!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A BRISK PASSAGE AT ARMS.

THROUGH all this, Digby Fairclough had watched and listened and taken mental notes, not for his own satisfaction alone, but with a view to still more completely removing the scales from over the eyes of his sister, Enid.

Right or wrong, he believed he had ample cause for both dislike and distrust, even without taking into consideration the outrageous conduct shown by Steel Surry that evening up in the hills. With that, and what he could repeat of this wild orgy to woman, surely the cure ought to be complete?

This it was, rather than any particular taste for turbulent scenes, that led to young Fairclough's entering the saloon, and this it was that held him there so long; for with belief came doubts, and to convince, he ought first to receive full conviction himself.

At times he felt sure that this was but the culmination of a protracted debauch, which could only end in an attack of delirium tremens. At other moments, he caught himself wondering whether there could be any foundation for the belief of Lippertoe and Kindred that Surry had been foully drugged. And it was with a real thrill of pity that he saw and heard the poor fellow make that reply.

"It's a shame to set him up as a spectacle for brutes to laugh at! Why don't his pretended friends take him away?"

The young man spoke impulsively, though in low tones. His nearest neighbor turned a glance of dull wonder or inquiry that way, but as a fresh burst came from the lips of him who was "playing circus" for their benefit in general, he turned away without reply or reflection.

"And so I say unto ye, miserable sinners all! Not as I do, but as I ought! Not as a pattern, but as an example! Not to be followed, for—steam's up, valve's open, thrackle wide! Toot, toot, toot! Orders read, and if a poor devil feels like kicking, let him do it in his own mind! Run for Total Ruin, via Utter Destruction, but side-track at Misery Junction for Satan's Express! Toot, toot, toot!"

With arms rotating at each side, and lungs sending forth heavy puffs as of steam, the crazed sport made for the door, all giving way for his passage, the majority of them laughing, with no other thought than that never another soul in all Break-neck could so successfully carry out a rare jest as this same Sport from Sunrise!

Steel Surry paused as his foot touched the threshold, turning about with a complete change of manner as he doffed his hat, to bow gravely:

"Good-evening, gentlemen, all! If I've said or done anything I ought to be sorry for, I'm mighty glad of it! And now, don't be such blessed idiots as to ask for more, when you've already had too much; in less poetical terms, mind your own business, and let me mind mine!"

Turning again, he vanished through the doorway, leaving the company to laugh or to scowl over that blunt hint, according to their taste.

However, it might have been otherwise, none of the citizens offered to follow the crazy sport, and Digby Fairclough was the sole person who left the saloon while the trail of Sir Steel was yet hot.

"He's crazy! He's not fit to be trusted alone! And yet, how can I offer him help after what has passed between us?"

Actually feeling a touch of shame at so doing, Digby Fairclough left the building, casting an eager glance around in quest of the mad sport as he entered the comparative gloom.

Moving unsteadily up the middle of the street he caught sight of Steel Surry, and almost before so deciding, he was on the trail. With what purpose?

That was a question Fairclough was not prepared to answer.

Even before an open rupture had taken place between them, far away toward the rising sun, their friendship had been anything but cordial. Their very natures seemed strongly antagonistic, and this fact, beyond a doubt, contributed no little toward that final break.

The strange holding-up of the stage which was bearing himself and sister to Break-neck; the quarrel, ending in blows; the reckless race down the Chute, which might so easily have ended in

an awful tragedy; all this, to say nothing of the disgraceful scenes which he had so recently witnessed, was a poor preparation for good samaritanism on his part. And yet—

"If I could be sure he hadn't brought it all upon himself through hard drinking! If I could believe he had been drugged, instead of—What next?"

The locoed sport had halted in a patch of moonlight, his clasped hands rising above his head, his face uplifted, his attitude one of supplication to a Higher Power.

Not a sound escaped his lips. Or, if so, 'twas too low to reach the ears of young Fairclough. But it was hard to put any other interpretation on that action: Steel Surry was praying!

"Crazy—drunk—which?" frowned the young man, urged forward by the native sympathy which is born with us, yet held back by the more recent dislike which unfortunate circumstances had raised as a barrier between them.

Either way, he felt more seriously now than when impulse had set him on the track of poor Sir Steel, that the sport was unfit to be left alone. If only some kindly friend might chance that way, with sense enough to see that the proper place for such a sorely bemused creature was in bed!

"If I hadn't— He struck me, and I struck him! Yet—"

Never before since he could remember, had Digby Fairclough such an annoying enigma to solve. Common humanity urged him to forget, for the time being, but native obstinacy—

And before he could act either way, Steel Surry dropped his hands, and once more moved on, but still with the uneven, irregular steps of one who has no particular destination in view, or whose brain is too utterly befogged for its owner to know whither his steps were leading him.

In a similar state of irresolution, Digby Fairclough followed, taking no particular pains to conceal his pursuit, yet favored in what followed by the lay of the ground, as well as an abrupt turn in course which Steel Surry made just at that juncture.

Sir Steel passed out of range of the young New Yorker, and Digby Fairclough paused, more strongly tempted to abandon the chase; then he caught sound of angry, vicious snarls coming round that bent, low, yet deadly ejaculations, followed closely by the sharp cry of a man who finds himself forced to do battle for dear life!

"Will ye, devils!" came the voice of Sir Steel, and losing all irresolution, Fairclough sprang forward, teeth and hands tightly clinched.

To come squarely upon a wrestling knot of humanity, just as it burst asunder, with one of those three knaves flying endlong before the muscular arms of the Sport from Sunrise!

"Take a tumble to yourself, Johnny! And you, dogs, here's small change for your cursed impudence in—"

"Slug him! fer keeps!" cried a hoarse, savage voice, and by the rays of the moon, Fairclough caught the venomous gleam of bared steel. "Down him—afore he kin raise a racket, lads!"

He made a vicious rush, which was boldly, dexterously met by the man assailed, but the other two knaves were closing in upon the sport, and he surely would have fared but illy, only for the aid that came so speedily.

"Hold 'em level, Surry!" cried Fairclough, darting forward, striking as he came, his hard fist sending one of the ruffians reeling dizzily backward. "Off, you infernal thugs!"

With a wrench that drew a hoarse cry from the fellow's lips, Sir Steel disarmed the biggest of his assailants, at the same time hurling him a dozen feet away.

This, added to that sudden onset from an unsuspected quarter, completed the discomfiture of the thugs, and with one accord they took to flight, just as the sport reeled dizzily, only saved from falling his full length by the arms of young Fairclough.

So unexpected was this failure, that Digby was nearly overthrown, but quickly recovering his balance, he ejaculated:

"Did they—you're hurt, Surry?"

"Hurt? Am I?" stammered the sport, rallying himself with an evident effort, then breaking forth with another of his misquotations: "Ay! a hit, a palpable hit! Hurt? what matter, me lord? 'Tis but a trifle, all told! Less deep than the bottomless pit, less broad than the path which leads to eternal destruction, yet 'tis enough for a hog!"

"I see no blood, yet—"

Steel Surry gave an abrupt start as though he had first fairly caught that anxious voice. He writhed free from that supporting grasp, then, with hands on the young man's shoulders, he gazed eagerly into his face, starting back with a hand flying to his own blood-marked brow as he huskily muttered:

"I know—surely I begin to remember! The devil's brew! The ride along—scat, ye cat! Who struck me, when I fell over the edge of the bottomless pit? Who—"

"Don't try to think, Mr. Surry, for you're not fit—"

"Think! I must think, or go mad! Surely I

was not dreaming when I saw—when I heard—your face is not—ha! I know you, now!"

He drew back, with what seemed a shudder of fear or of anger, just which, Digby Fairclough was unable to decide, off-hand.

"I'm not anxious to force my company upon you, be sure," he coldly said, but forcing himself to add: "You are suffering, and are not fit to be out in the night air. Go home, and go to bed; you'd better."

"I thought—'twas all a dream! I thought it but part of the crazy fancies that infernal drug crammed my dizzy brain with, until they bade fair to split my poor skull asunder! I thought—or was it but fancy? Did I not see—that dear face! That sweet voice! Am I mad, to—"

"If not mad, you're too mighty near it for any fun!" almost harshly interrupted Fairclough, his face flushing hotly under the light of the moon, at this allusion to his sister. "Stop trying to think, and go home at once! You're not fit to be out longer, man!"

"Not fit? Ay! so you told me when—I was a man, then! Now—what am I? Where am I? What makes this infernal boiling inside my poor skull? What makes— Home? I have no home! Pitiless, hopeless, widely I roam, without—out—Who did it?" once more clasping both hands to his temples, swaying dizzily to and fro.

"I was riding along—I heard a yell, a shot, and then—some merciless fiend filled me up with molten brimstone! Devils haunted me until—I saw the face of an angel, who used to smile—"

"Will you go home, Steel Surry?"

"Home? Yes, I'll go home, and see if I can't sleep off this horrible dream! Sleep? Ay! I'm sleepy—so sleepy—sleep—"

He turned away, reeling drunkenly, only to fling up his arms and pitch forward upon his face, like one touched by the hand of death!

CHAPTER XXII.

WAITING FOR THE VERDICT.

It all happened so quickly that Digby Fairclough was unable to lend assistance before the Sport from Sunrise lay a limp and lifeless heap in the dust.

A sharp cry of consternation broke from his lips, and forgetting for the moment his resentment, he sprang forward, dropping to his knees by the side of the stricken man, lifting his head in his arms, with the dangerous impulse which comes over the wisest of us when unexpectedly confronted with a swooning person.

For Steel Surry was in a swoon, rather than dead; his breathing proclaimed as much; faint, fluttering, coming back to him in irregular gasps after that brief cessation.

"Brace up, man! For Heaven's sake—he's dying, and no one near to lend a hand!"

Brisk as that passage at arms had been while it lasted, not enough noise had been made to attract outside attention to that lonely spot. Although they were still within the lines of Break-neck, no one appeared to be living in that immediate quarter, or else all were buried in profound slumber.

Not another mortal could Digby Fairclough catch sight of, as he cast a hasty, anxious glance around them. And instead of reviving, the stricken man appeared to be growing worse, his breath nearly ceasing, his pale face growing more livid and ghastly the while.

In his fright, Fairclough did precisely what he should have done at first: lowered the head of Sir Steel to the ground, where it most fortunately found a slight depression to rest in, thus giving nature the very chance she needed most.

"I can't carry him—I daren't leave him, for those thugs— I say, you!" lifting his voice in a sharp, fierce shout. "Help! this way, friends!"

Drawing a revolver from his hip-pocket, Fairclough elevated its muzzle and discharged its five shots in rapid succession, almost unconsciously employing the cowboy signal of distress.

A brief silence, then a shout came floating through the night, to be followed by others in rapid succession. And to guide them aright, lifted his voice again and again, then adding, as he caught sight of one or more rapidly advancing shapes:

"Bring lights! I fear Sir Steel is dying—or dead!"

Sharp ejaculations told how intense was the interest awakened by those words, but the shapes came on more swiftly than before, and as the foremost one caught sight of those two forms, one prostrate, the other erect with empty pistol in hand, his own armed hand went up to cover the stranger, and he sternly cried:

"Steady, you! Move, and I'll bore you through. Fetch a light, Dan, and pass the word for the doctor!"

Luckily, Fairclough had the good sense to comply with that stern command, thanks to the bit of wild life he had seen since nearing Break-neck; but he managed to tell his story by the time others came up, among whom, most fortunately, was a physician, who lost no time in asking questions before falling to work over the unconscious sport.

Fairclough was called upon to repeat his story as the crowd increased, but his explanation was not received without some suspicion, and the

sturdy fellow who had covered him with a gun on general principles, grimly said:

"I'm not saying you're stretching the truth, stranger, but—you be a stranger to the heap o' us! And so—steady goes! Sir Steel is white as they make 'em, and if he croaks there's got to be full payment made—by somebody!"

"I never harmed him. I came up just in time to save him from being murdered by those three thugs. Yonder is the knife one of them dropped before he ran away?"

"Save it, Dan! Maybe it'll be a clew. And you, stranger, if you're as clean white as you try to pan out, can't object if we sorter keep ye under our eyes until Doc says how Surry is booked."

Fairclough, though feeling intensely disgusted over it all, now that his flush of sympathy for Sir Steel was beginning to die out, was too sensible to attempt more than calm argument. He was listened to in grave silence, if not actual respect, but his self-appointed guard was unmoved in his grim determination, and when strong arms bore the stricken sport back to the Tip-top House, Fairclough bore him company, a prisoner in all save actual bonds.

A brief halt was made at the office, while a room and bed could be prepared for the patient, and then, just as the doctor pronounced that Sir Steel was suffering from a drug, more than from the blows he had received, Surry revived sufficiently to clear Fairclough from all suspicion of wrong-doing.

"He didn't—he saved me from—let him go!"

Those were the only coherent words that Sir Steel uttered, however. His brain again seemed to turn topsy-turvy, and he rambled wildly for a brief space, only to sink once more into that dangerous stupor.

"Never mention it, sir," a little stiffly bowed Fairclough, as his self-appointed guard apologized for his recent suspicions. "As I knew I had committed no wrong, your doubts could not injure me in the least. I suppose it's part of the life, out here."

In response to the eager questions with which he was plied, Digby Fairclough could give but a vague description of the three thugs who had assaulted Sir Steel, but that little was better than nothing, and little squads at once sallied forth in hopes of bagging the criminals.

"An' ef they ketch 'em, sir, you'll see one o' the gayest old hangin'-bees you ever hearn tell of!" enthusiastically declared Elias Deakin, rubbing his hands together with anticipative glee.

From his lips Fairclough learned that his sister had shown no signs of being disturbed by the passage of those who carried the unconscious sport to his chamber, but to make sure, he stole up to her door, listening at the key-hole until he caught the low, peaceful breathing which plainly betokened slumber.

He gently tapped at the door to make sure, but no answer coming back, he retraced his steps to the office, intending to await the descent of the physician, to hear what verdict he might have to deliver.

He was fated to wait a considerable time, during which he caught the sound of occasional footsteps echoing along the hallway above. As often his brows gathered darkly, for he feared lest the slumbers of his sister be needlessly broken, and—

"She's had too much food for thought given her already!" he muttered, back of his teeth.

"She had nearly forgotten, but now—"

He could hardly bring himself to curse a man who might be even then floating across the verge to eternity, but in his heart he came perilously near so doing!

At length the doctor came down-stairs and entered the bar, in company with Elias Deakin, whose fat, honest face bore plain evidence of recent emotion. He shuffled inside the railing, as though more than willing to escape any questioning, but the physician was more ready.

"You are the gentleman who found Surry, are you not?" he asked, in place of at once replying to that question.

"I was so fortunate, yes, sir. And now—he is not dangerously injured, I trust?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear sir! His scalp is cut, and he received a number of nasty blows, but nothing to take serious count of. The drugging offered the worst feature, but I feel safe in predicting that when this sleep comes to a natural end, Sir Steel will be bright and chipper as in his palmiest days! Yes, sir! I stake my professional reputation upon it, sir!"

"Then he was actually drugged? It was not liquor?"

"He was drugged, badly drugged, sir! As for drink, Sir Steel is remarkably abstemious, re-mar-ka-bly abstemious, sir! And if his skull hadn't been injured—not fractured, you understand, sir, but the recipient of a very heavy blow of some sort—that drugged draught would only have cast him into a deep slumber, from which he would have awakened without so much as a headache! I know the weed, and I know what I am saying, sir! 'Twas that blow which turned him crazy, combining as it did with the drug!"

The good doctor plainly loved to listen to the sound of his own tongue, and had Fairclough offered him any further encouragement, it is diffi-

cult to predict at what hour his positive yet dignified assertions would have come to an ending.

But, having won the point for which he had waited so long, and beginning to feel a bit disgusted with himself for taking so much trouble about a man whom he thoroughly disliked and distrusted, as well as beginning to feel sleepy, Fairclough as politely as might be shook himself clear of the physician, asking the landlord for the key to his chamber.

Hardly in accordance with his usual custom, Elias Deakin said never a word as he complied, and hardly seemed to breathe freely until the young man had passed out of sight through the office door.

"Good by, you!" Deakin mumbled, after. "Ef they's a row, the old lady must pay the piper, not me!"

Digby Fairclough met the solution right speedily, for as he reached the corridor above, light in hand, the door of Emil's chamber was opened, and his sister, fully dressed, hurried forth to agitatedly clutch his arm as she huskily asked:

"Tell me—he is not—not—dead?"

"What! you know—come with me, sister," Digby muttered, his face dark and stern as he half-forced, half-carried the maiden back to her chamber, closing the door behind them, then demanding: "How did you hear anything about it? Who told you?"

"The landlady came—tell me, brother," her voice choking with a sob. "He is not—he will recover?"

"I came up here, and found you were sleeping. How that confounded woman could have the cheek to disturb you, I can't make out!"

"I heard the trampling, and peeped out. She saw me, and then—but you have not answered me, Digby!" with a flash of spirit that was close akin to his own. "He will live through it?"

"Yes, or the doctor lies," was the blunt response. "Now, Emil, once for all, you've got to act sensible. This fellow is nothing, can be nothing whatever to you."

"I know, but—he was so cruelly wronged, Digby! She said—"

"I wish the saying had cracked her throat! What right had the old witch to—but let her drop! As for you, sister, I don't wish to talk too harshly, but, once for all I repeat: forget that fellow! He is not fit for a lady's thoughts, even if she had nothing else to occupy her mind—and you surely have!"

"Steel Surry can never be aught to us, and gracious knows we've got work enough cut out for us, in solving the enigma which brought us to Break-neck! Now, go to bed, as I mean to do. So, good-night, sister!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNCLE SAM TAKES THE REINS.

THE giant black shook his head at that sharply-uttered query, and the ghost of a smile came across his stern face. Evidently lynching was a far less terrible term in his estimation than in that of his master.

"What matter if I be lynched, master? You will have two enemies the less to fear."

"And not one friend left! No, boy, you shall not go! Without you, what would become of me? Without your head to plan, your arm to do, how long would it be before I— You shall not go, Sam!"

"There is only one other way, master, and since you positively decline to take that course, what else can I do?"

"If I must—but anything is better than letting you cut loose from me now, boy," gloomily mumbled the old man, his head bowing on his hands, a shivering fit once more assailing him.

He could not have chosen better weapons for disarming the faithful being who had served him so long, and with a choking catch in his voice, Uncle Sam said, as he returned to the side of that bowed figure:

"Master, it makes my fool heart bleed, even to hint at flying in the face of your commands, but what other way is there left open for us to follow? We have wasted a lifetime in flight, only to end in being blocked in a wild-beast den like this!"

"We can go—there are other parts of the world, where—"

"Where we would be hunted down, just as savagely as now! There is no safety in flight, master. We can hope to win only by plucking up courage and fighting back. And as the first step in doing that, I've sent for your dead sister's children to come here."

The old man lifted his head with an irritable sound, and Uncle Sam did not attempt to replace his hand, as it was cast aside, pettishly.

"What good will that do, boy?"

"Much, if my prayers come true, master. I sent for Miss Marcia's children to come here, meaning to bring you and them together, hoping through them to win you back to a more Christian life."

"To have so many more hungry wolves snapping and snarling over my old bones, rather!"

Those words cut keenly, but where a less faithful friend might have shown anger at such base suspicions, the negro broke down for the mo-

ment. His head bowed, and as his hands rose to meet it, hot tears wet his horny fingers.

Mayo Galloway fidgeted on his seat of leaves, his bony fingers working in and out as though they were itching to touch that bent head in mute apology. But before their owner could quite crush down the irritation born of his troubles, Uncle Sam rallied, covertly sweeping his eyes dry while his face was averted from the light.

"If nothing better, master, their coming will give the enemy others to think about, others to divide the hatred they have centered on you!"

A low, pained cry escaped the old man, and he made a shivering gesture of negation as he huskily spoke:

"No, no! I wish no mortal being to suffer as I have had to suffer for so many weary years! Send them back, boy! Forbid their coming to this den of devils incarnate! Tell them—"

"That their sainted mother's brother is waiting to give them a welcome! Say that I may tell them that, master!"

"What good would that do? I fear you are growing childish in your old age, Sam."

His tones were growing milder, and the negro was keen enough to see that he was gaining ground. If he did not ruin all by trying to gain his point too swiftly, he might yet succeed.

"Ay, master!" he said, with a sigh which was not all counterfeit. "I'm not so young as I was before the frost began to streak your hair! I can't bear up against the weights I only laughed at, then! And so, I'd like to hold out until I knew you were safe, master!"

"Don't be silly, boy! You'll live to clip the grass from my grave, a round dozen years, for that matter."

"You can't think that, Master Mayo. From birth, almost, I've been your servant, your shadow. When you go down to the grave, old Sam'll not stay behind. He'd go before, if 'twas good manners, but—"

"Neither of us is quite ready for the grave, boy, and it's chilly talk for a cool night," muttered Galloway, fumbling about to drop a few dry bits upon the little fire. "I'm turning sleepy, and—"

"While you sleep, master, I must be working. If you'd only say that I go with your best wishes, master!"

"What! you haven't given up that insane notion yet, boy?"

"Unless you can suggest a better and wiser, master, I mean to carry it out, if any single man can."

There was a brief silence, during which Mayo Galloway stared moodily at the renewed blaze, his bony fingers tightly interlocked as his arms crossed his bent legs, his brows gathered as though in troubled thought.

Uncle Sam glanced toward the barred tunnel, his head instinctively bending in that direction, like one listening for the sounds which, sooner or later, he feels sure must come.

As yet there was nothing to tell of spy, or more dangerous force of enemies. If his strong suspicions had been based on fact, the night was still too young for that coming.

"Tell me just what you have done, Sam," presently spoke up the white man, but without turning his gaze from the little fire.

"About the young people, master?"

"Yes. You say you have sent for them to come out here, to Break-neck: why?"

"To see you, master."

"To what end? What good could the sight of a miserable, broken-down refugee like me be to them? True," with a bitter laugh, "it might give them something to laugh at!"

"Don't, master!" muttered Uncle Sam, his dark face betraying how sharply that barb rankled in his honest heart.

"So I say to you, boy: don't!" quickly retorted the misanthrope. "I only wish I had so much as suspected this foolish scheme of yours in time to block it, first-off!"

The pettish sharpness with which Mayo Galloway spoke, lent Uncle Sam the very impetus he required, and in clearer, steadier tones, he spoke upon once more:

"The harm is done, if harm it be, master. I did not ask your permission, because I felt sure it would be denied. I did not ask your advice, because I feared it would not be wisely given. Pardon, master, but now, if ever, the time has come for plain speaking and bold action!"

"For years we have been hunted like mad-dogs! Better we had been like them in using our teeth! Instead we tried to hide, now here, now there, but ever and always driven to flight again, to avoid death!"

"In place of growing better, matters have gone steadily from bad to worse. When lives were plentier, we had days of comparative peace; but since the number has grown less and less, until only your life stands between the accursed money and those pitiless demons, we are hunted night and day, in season and out!"

"Why recall it, boy? Don't I know?"

"Why do I recall it, you ask, master? To prove to you once again how little hope this time flight can give us! To make you see, as I saw long years ago, that our one and only chance lies in turning at bay, to fight those devils!"

"They are many, we but two! And—I'm old, Sam! Old and weak, and broken down—in mind even worse than in body, I fear!"

His head bowed once more, and Uncle Sam instinctively reached forth a pitying hand: only to jerk it back and clasp his fingers rigidly behind his body. Not now! He had begun, he must continue, or have his bitter work all to do over again.

"That is because you have no rest, no peace of mind, master," he said, forcing himself to speak with grave decision. "Knowing this, I'm determined to bring about a change, even against your wishes, sir."

"I told you how I found out about your relatives, from Kentucky, master, and how I made sure there was no bad blood to be found along the line of their father's people: I knew the mother stock too well to feel a doubt in that direction, of course!"

"It took long for me to make up my mind just what to do, for my brain is slow and sluggish, as you know, master. But when I did decide, I sent a letter to the young people, begging them to come out here as quickly as possible, telling them that the brother of their mother was anxious to meet his heirs in the flesh."

"Heirs to what a legacy!" groaned the old man.

"Heirs to a fortune vast enough to enrich a score, and so I told them when I wrote, master!"

"You lied, then, boy! I've nothing for them to heir save death, so long as Jaffray Pilkington and Ozias Popp are alive. You know that!"

"I know, master, but pray bear me through," resolutely added the negro, his courage growing the longer he opposed the one to whom he had yielded his better judgment far too long. "If these young people come, as I feel sure they will, after what I wrote, they may reach Break-neck by almost any stage, now! Then, after you have seen and talked with them enough to feel sure they are worthy the mother who bore them, I'll do the rest!"

"And that rest, boy?"

"To make sure those young people are really your legal heirs, as I told them, sir!" with a flash of fire leaping into his eyes. "I can do it without fear of lynching, master, for there's no lack of proof at hand that those two devils have time and time again tried to murder us both. Who, then, can fault me if I deal out to them a dose of the same medicine?"

"No, no, Sam! I tell you this must not be! You're black, and they're white—of skin, at least! You'd surely be lynched!"

"Let it go at that, then, master. You would be free, and to bring that about, I'd die a thousand such deaths!"

"I believe you would, Sam, but what would I be, to permit such a monstrous sacrifice? Only for me, you'd never be in danger!"

"Only for you, master, I'd been worse than dead, long years ago! You took me out of the depths of ignorance, and you—but let that go, for now. I'm in earnest, master, and all your reasoning, all your commands, even, fall like rain on a duck's back. I'll kill those two men, or be killed by them in trying!"

Mayo Galloway gazed almost bewilderedly into that strong, black face. Never before had Uncle Sam defied him so openly, and in his present state of mind, the refugee was totally unfit to bend that resolute will to suit his own ideas.

Before he could find words to reply, Uncle Sam lifted a hand in a gesture of warning, flashing a fiery glance toward that barricaded passage, from whence came the muffled sound of human voices.

CHAPTER XXIV.

STUDYING AN ENEMY.

THE cause of the alarm which the keen-eared black was so quick to take, has already been touched upon.

Finding their hopes foiled for the present by the unlooked-for barricade, where Fritz England had led them to expect naught but smooth sailing, the enemy beat a retreat, to end in reunion beyond that dense thicket, as soon as Kate Pilkington had overcome the natural fears of the bony spy.

Pierced disappointed though he was by another failure to add to his already long record, Hardress Pilkington was open to reason, and as Fritz England gave his foundation for believing that another method of gaining or leaving that hill refuge existed, the red-haired giant grimly nodded assent to the suggestion offered.

"We'll try it at all events, since this is no thoroughfare. Lead the way around to the point you have in mind, Fritz, and if it pans out as you think, I'll not only overlook your botch work of this night, but give you enough to make drunk come every day for a solid year!"

"Me too, boss?" eagerly asked Tom Inkstone.

"You too, of course."

"Then I'll make a way, if there isn't one already!" grimly chuckled the man with a chronic thirst.

No more words were wasted then, and following the lead given by the gaunt spy, the party picked their way over the difficult tract, to fin-

ally sink down under cover at a point from whence they could leisurely view that nearly perpendicular cliff, by the aid of the moonlight.

There was nothing much to be seen; only the bare rocks, broken in places by narrow, irregular ledges, but which apparently would defy even a mountain-goat to scale.

There was no sign of human life, and keenly, carefully though they scanned that wall, not one of them could discover trace of light, other than that shed by the fair moon.

"Easy, brother," whispered Kate, as Hard Pill gave vent to a snarling curse of fierce disappointment. "If they blew up the passage intentionally, 'twas because they knew or suspected we were close upon their track. And would they do it at, without knowing they could escape by another route?"

"Why can't we see some signs, then?"

"Because the nigger isn't a fool, if his master is growing weak and childish. Uncle Sam would be both, were he to hang out such a beacon as you hoped to sight. And I tell you, Hard, we'll never win the prize until you've taken my advice: kill that nigger!"

"I'll do it, the first chance I get. Now—boys?"

Instantly Fritz and Inkstone were all attention.

"You know what you've got to do, supposing those imps haven't really been crushed to death by that blast?"

"To watch, lying low, I reckon, boss?"

"Exactly. To watch until you know they're dead, or you find out a way to get at them in hiding. If you find that, you, Tom, will stay here to keep guard, while Fritz comes, hot-foot, with the news to Break-neck."

"You know where we live, Fritz," supplemented Kate Pilkington. "One or the other of us will always be there, whether you come by night or by day. Now—do your duty, as you hope for pay!"

"I'll pay you with death, if you make another botch of it, mind!" savagely growled Hard Pill, as he yielded to the grasp of his wife's hand.

Leaving the two spies on guard, Kate and Hardress crept cautiously away under cover, until at a safe distance, then quickened their steps as they picked their way back to where their horses had been left.

Although nothing had been said to that effect, the extra animal was turned loose to follow after its mates. Tom Inkstone would have no further use for him, for the present.

Wherever the nature of the ground would permit, husband and wife rode along side by side, talking together. The discovery which Hardress Pilkington had made that afternoon, in that stolen portion of a letter, afforded matter enough to keep their tongues busy, even as it did their scheming brains.

Then, too, they found further food for thought in the story told by Tom Inkstone so far as it related to Sir Steel, or the Sport from Sunrise, as Steel Surry was equally well known to the citizens of Break-neck and adjacent camps.

"If he takes up their quarrel—and he'd be just crazy enough to do that, no matter how rudely they treated him after saving his life—we're going to have trouble with the sport."

"Unless trouble falls all over him, first!" grimly growled Hardress.

"If it can be managed without throwing the blame too clearly on our side, of course! We're in none too good odor as it stands, Hard, as you ought to know!"

"Because of father? Devil toast 'em all! I'll even-up along that line, just as soon as we can bring off the trick he failed to turn."

Presently their conversation shifted to that incomplete letter, and the new characters which it threatened to bring into their dangerous game.

"I'll send a runner across to see what's waiting at the end of the line, early in the morning," said Hardress. "I can't think Huddle would let them give him the slip, or that, even if they should, he'd let an hour go without warning me by wire."

"Provided he has not tried to turn a trick on his own accord, and got nipped at it!" laughingly suggested Kate, though she little dreamed how surely she had hit upon the actual facts of the case.

Mark Huddle had been caught with a hand in the wrong pocket, and was now behind the bars, too closely watched to be able to send a warning message to his far-away employer!

Although it was hardly likely that anything more than a letter had come by that evening's stage, to interest them, as soon as he had put up and cared for their horses after reaching Break-neck, Pilkington went down town, to find the post-office closed, as he expected it would be.

His steps were quickened a bit more than usual as he caught the rapid report of fire-arms, and he turned away from the darkened office, just in time to meet the body of Sir Steel as it was carried to the Tip-top House.

Even if he had not attained a fresh interest in the Sport from Sunrise, Pilkington would have joined the anxious crowd all the same, for a man of violence is ever ready to share in whatever excitement offers itself.

Still he did not care to make himself too

prominent, for, as Kate had hinted, he was anything but a popular idol in Break-neck, since the fitting end of his father's career.

Keeping rather on the skirts of the crowd, Hard Pill picked up sufficient to know that yonder well-dressed stranger was mixed up in the affair, and a subtle sort of instinct warned him that it might be well worth while to keep an eye on that same stranger for a time.

It actually occurred to him that he might be the young man named in that stolen letter, but he banished that fancy as too highly improbable for a second thought.

Although the crowd gradually melted away after Sir Steel rallied long enough to declare the innocence of the young man under nominal guard, Hardress Pilkington did not relax his covert vigilance, and all through that weary spell of waiting for the verdict on the part of Digby Fairclough, he kept an eye on the young man.

He was still lounging in seeming carelessness just outside the door, when the landlord and the doctor came down-stairs, and he fairly held his breath to catch every word that should be spoken.

He gave an inward curse as he learned the doctor's opinion regarding the drugged sport, but listened with none the less intensity, hoping to hear the young stranger give or be called by his name.

As seen, this hope was met by disappointment, for, uneasy in conscience over the unjustifiable disturbing of this young man's sister, Elias Deakin was only too glad to send him off with lamp and key, without his customary voluble good-night wishes.

Shortly after Digby Fairclough passed out of the office, several men entered the place to inquire after the sport, and taking advantage of their drinking with Deakin to the speedy recovery of Sir Steel, Pilkington entered the room and at once examined the register.

His gaze instantly fell upon the two names which seemed fairly burned in his brain, and fearing to trust himself to ask any questions of the landlord, he left the office for the cool night air.

Deep, if not loud, rumbled his fierce curses, and tough though his palms were, they showed fresh blood, drawn by his nails as his fingers contracted so viciously.

Hard though the quarters were which Mark Huddle occupied at that very hour, and worse those which his gloomy vision saw looming up in the near future, they were as a bed of down scented with roses, in comparison to the one to which his employer was consigning him, just then!

As he had that same day, just so Hardress Pilkington burst in upon Kate, his wife, and for a few minutes he could say or do nothing save curse and ramp around, worse than a maniac. Until, with a cool audacity which no other living person would have dared exhibit under the circumstances, the woman caught up a bowl which was nearly full of water, casting its contents squarely into the giant's face!

"That's better than bidding you go soak your head, Hardress," she laughed, as he caught his breath, then gasped and spluttered furiously.

"Now, simmer down, and talk sense! What's biting you so keenly, anyway?"

Her exquisite coolness, even more than that douche, served to calm the hot-headed ruffian, and dropping into a chair as he combed his dripping beard with crooked fingers, Pilkington blurted out the truth:

"They've come! I've seen one of them, with my own eyes!"

"Of course you did, if you saw them at all," mocked his wife, even while an eager interest leaped into her face and caused her dark eyes to sparkle even more than usual. "But—whom do you mean?"

"You know—that letter Mark Huddle sent—devil roast him alive for making the worst botch—"

"Roast goes, with all my heart, but if botch-work could kill, we'd have croaked long ages ago! All the same—what and how did you find out? Business, old fellow?"

Growing more collected as her influence made itself felt, Pilkington gave a fairly clear description of what he had seen and learned at the Tip-top House. And then, at her request, he drew a fair portrait in words of Digby Fairclough.

"Now, what are we going to do about it, Kate?"

"Well, what's the matter with the plan your father had in view, at one time?" coolly drawled the woman, showing her white teeth.

"What! you surely don't mean that?"

"I surely do, and why not? What can be more charmingly romantic than a double wedding?"

CHAPTER XXV.

A MEETING IN THE HILLS.

THE remainder of that night passed by without disturbance, so far as Digby Fairclough was concerned, and being blessed with a tolerably clear conscience of his own, that young gentleman left his bed in a far more amiable mood than the one he had taken to bed with him.

Although he had risen before any summons came to his door, Digby was aware that the household had been astir for some little time, for sounds echoed through that none too solid structure pretty much as they liked, and he was astonished, as well as a little provoked, when he took a glance at his watch after dressing.

"I might have slept another hour or two, only for—all right! I can put in the time asking questions and getting all that over before Enid need be disturbed for breakfast!"

On descending to the lower regions, Fairclough quickly discovered the fact that his were not the first lips to ask how Sir Steel had spent the night, and what were the prospects for his speedy recovery. Scores of anxious friends—for all in Break-neck appeared to feel that way—had called, and other scores kept dropping in, giving Elias Deakin all his nimble tongue could attend to.

There was no change for the worse, if there had been none for the better, which wasn't for him to say yes or no. The sport was sleeping now, just as he had been sleeping all night, ever since the doctor left.

And presently the doctor came, to deliver a cheering verdict, after paying a visit to his patient.

"Sleep, sir! Sleep is all that's wanted to complete the cure! And when Sir Steel awakens, he will be himself again, fit for fun, frolic or fighting, and if any speculative gentleman in Break-neck holds a contrary opinion, I'll be more than happy to grant him a few moments' private conversation, with 'money talks' as the key-note! Yes, sir!"

With this information as a basis, Digby felt ready to meet his sister, and though her glowing cheeks—he could not win a fair look at her eyes before they were hidden back of those drooping lids—gave him a chance for frowning at weak woman's folly, on the whole that delicate point was gotten over with less trouble than might have been expected after their parting the night before.

With breakfast over, and Enid obediently pledged to remain in careful seclusion until the puzzle which had brought them to such a wild and benighted region should be solved, Digby Fairclough lit a cigar and slowly paced to and fro along the broad piazza which rendered the Tip-top House such a favorite lounging-place for those indolently inclined.

This lazy promenade was started with a thought that a better chance could hardly be offered that mysterious correspondent, but before long, the young man had entirely forgotten that idea, losing himself in thought so deeply that, when a hand touched his arm, he gave a great start and a dazed stare.

"You're D. F., I reckon, boss?" mumbled the rough-clad fellow, with a half-suspicious glance around them. "From New York. To wait on-tel called fer. Eh?"

"And you are—"

"Jest takin' a little walk fer my good health, boss, which I don't reckon anybody'll keer, nur yit tromple too mighty close onto the heels o' me fer comfort or safety. An' so he's pickin' up? Waal, they hain't so mighty many good boys layin' 'round loose, that we kin 'ford to let any one go slide, so—good-luck to the good news!"

With a subdued cheer as though his only thought was of Sir Steel and his certain recovery, the fellow left the porch, slouching off in a direction which would, if maintained long enough, land him fairly in the hills to the north of Break-neck Chute.

Digby Fairclough felt anything but at ease as he stared after the stranger, whose first words had given him cause for belief that their unknown correspondent was surely coming to the front. But—could this rough, uncouth, vagabondish-looking fellow, be he whose hand wrote those startling tidings?

"Maybe he's only a messenger!" flashed through his mind, just in time to keep him from entirely losing sight of that slouching shape.

Before he was fairly clear of Break-neck, Fairclough received a signal which convinced him he was on the right track, so far as falling in with this stranger's wishes was concerned.

"But, who's to insure he's not working a scheme of his own? Who's going bail he isn't one of those thugs, trying to play even for my spoiling their little game last night? If so—well, we'll have some fun out of it, anyway!"

As Digby took a cool look at his revolver, it may be seen how rapidly he was falling in with the customs of his latest place of residence!

When once fairly out of sight of town, his guide came to a halt, and the young New Yorker quickly came up with him, to be saluted with a broad grin and a dingy bit of paper.

"You're keen to catch a hint, boss, an' that's the sort I hankers a'ter! Makes it heap sight easier fer a critter to aim wages."

"I see that this bit of paper bids me trust the bearer," said the young man, his keen eyes turning from slip to face. "Why should I trust you, and how far?"

"As fer why, that's 'twixt you'nd him. As fer furness, that's mebbe a mild an' a half, or mebbe two mild furdur."

"Who sent you to find me?"

"I can't read writin', boss."

"His name is not here, so you missed nothing through being ignorant in that direction. But—who sent you?"

"Him as paid me fer my time an' trouble. Him as said I was to come back to whar he 'gred to be waitin', an' to fetch you 'long ef so be you was minded to foller. That don't mean tote, an' I don't mean to do it, nuther!"

With a careless air, the fellow turned about, slouching off through that rocky tract. If not wholly indifferent as to whether he was accompanied or not, he at least bore that appearance.

"I say, you!" sharply cried Fairclough, moving forward as he spoke.

"All right, boss. I'm listenin', ef you want to chin a bit."

"You're a stranger to me, and so is the one who wrote this note. How am I to know that it isn't all a trick to get me where I can't defend myself against—"

"Then you don't know the nigger, boss?"

"The negro?" echoed Fairclough.

"The nigger, fer a fact! A nigger, called Uncle Sam, paid me fer to git you 'way from town, whar he's some reason fer bein' skeered to show himself too free; 'long o' Hard Pill, I reckon, jedgin' by the way he seemed all mixed up when I told him as how— But that don't count!"

"The nigger is over yender a little, waitin' fer me to fetch you. I'm gwine thar, as agreed. Ef you keer to foller, all right. Ef you're skeered to do that, all right ag'in! I'm airnin' wages, an' that's heap plenty good 'nough fer me, ef I be a bog!"

The fellow slouched off once more, but with a fivelier step, and after a brief hesitation, Digby Fairclough followed after.

"I've come too far to be turned back by shadows," he reflected, but with one hand conveniently near his pistol. "If it's a trap, we'll see who get's caught the tightest."

With both men of the same mind, it did not take long for them to reach the rendezvous, and as a tall, broad-shouldered figure rose up from among the rocks, Digby Fairclough warily slackened his pace, while keenly scanning both face and figure.

"Hyar's your meat, Uncle Sam!" called forth the guide, with a wave of his dingy paw. "He come when I whistled the tune o' D. F., as you said, an' ef thar's ary bitch or mistake, don't go fer to blame me!"

The giant negro was gazing with a troubled expression upon his face, so that concluding sentence was perfectly natural. He seemed looking for something he failed to find, and there was a note of anxious doubt in his deep tones as he spoke:

"You are not like your mother, young gentleman, for her eyes were black as jet, and her complexion was—"

"I follow my father's side of the house. But, who are you, and what can you want with me?"

"Much, if you are the person I hope! Tell me, first, did your mother's first name begin with the letter M?"

"Her name was Marcia, my father's name Theron. If you want to know more, you've got to show cause!"

"I can, I will! But, first, you see this man? His name is John Bowles. He can go where I dare not, and if ever I have occasion to send him to you, with word or message, trust him as you would myself!"

"After you have proven yourself fit for trust, of course!" half sneered the young man, still standing on guard, although he was growing impressed by the negro's intense earnestness.

Uncle Sam flinched a little at that tone, but it served a good purpose, after all, since it recalled his usual coolness. He turned toward Bowles, saying:

"You have fully earned your pay, friend. I may need you again, so keep on your guard, and follow the instructions I gave you. I can depend on you, sir?"

"Bet ye! Long's you pay sech wages, I'm open fer business."

"That is well. Say nothing to others, and you'll be all the richer for it, in the end. I may need to use you again, shortly, so please wait for me by yonder blue rock."

Johnny Bowles slouched away toward the point indicated, and Uncle Sam turned toward the young man, whose curiosity was growing, rather than fading away.

"You are the son of Marcia and Theron Fairclough, then? You brought your sister, Enid, out to Break-neck with you?"

"Yes, to both questions. And now, who are you, and what did you mean by writing that crazy letter, which brought us on a crazier trip?"

"Not so crazy as you think; not near so crazy as even I thought at the time!" ejaculated Uncle Sam, his eyes aglow, his face upturned as though in a silent prayer of thankfulness. "The hand of God is in it all! What will master say, when I tell him the glorious news?"

"Not knowing, can't say," dryly interjected Digby. "Who is your master, and what has he got to do with our coming here? Surely he is not— But you tell!"

"He is your uncle, your sainted mother's eldest brother, Mayo. He is waiting to welcome you, boy! He is waiting—"

"After waiting so many years, a few minutes, or even hours, longer, can hardly hurt the ancient gentleman very much. And so, please open your budget yet a little wider. I'm young, I know, but I'm quite old enough to tell the difference between empty chaff and solid wheat. Just what is it you expect me to do?"

"To receive a kind relative, and a glorious fortune, at one and the same time!" quickly cried the giant negro, all enthusiasm now.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CLEARING HIS RECORD.

It was well along toward mid-day when Sir Steel opened his eyes to consciousness, and baring a certain confusion of mind, which was to be expected after all he had passed through, the prediction made by the doctor was fully confirmed.

Barring a little tenderness where the thugs had favored him, last night, and a certain dull aching beneath those strips of plaster, half-hidden by his short curls, added to a mighty hollowness which only a liberal supply of warm food could entirely alleviate, Steel Surry was as sound as ever in all his life.

A brisk summons brought Elias Deakin to his bedside, and after the worthy host had passed word on to his still more worthy wife, to have a plentiful meal in readiness with the least possible delay, his glibly wagging tongue went far toward enlightening his favored guest.

But Steel Surry learned even more from the lips of Mrs. Deakin, one of whose favorites he was, and she helped him make up for lost time at the table, set in her own especial room.

Being a woman, who had not entirely forgotten the days of her youth, Mrs. Deakin seemed to divine exactly what Surry wished cleared up the most, and while paying no seeming attention to his evident agitation, she told of Enid Fairclough, and her "taking on" when she learned what trouble had overtaken the handsome young gentleman to whose marvelous skill and unequalled nerve she owed her escape from a horrible death in that runaway dash down Break-neck Chute.

"And a sweeter, kinder, more lady-like darling never came under my two eyes, so they never, sir! And if I was a young gentleman like—if I was a young gentleman, sir, I know where I'd go to look for a wife!"

So kindly a hint as this—which is but the ghost of her good offices—surely deserved a smile at the very least. Instead, Surry sighed heavily, his face very grave, his manner despondent.

The last fumes of that noxious drug were dying away, and as his brain was left clearer, it all began to come back to him, helped no doubt by the hints he had received from landlord and lady. And as he thought of his crazy antics of the past night, his face flushed until Mrs. Deakin gave a cry of wonder and alarm.

"You're turning ill again, dear heart! I'll call the doctor, to—"

"No, no! I'm ill, but only at heart," was his hasty objection.

"At heart? If you only knew Miss Enid, now!"

"I do know her—and now she knows me, worse luck!"

Only they were in the room, and Mrs. Deakin had none to hinder her in her attempt to cheer up the despondent sport. And so well did she succeed, that, at the end, Steel Surry sent her away to beg a moment's interview with Miss Fairclough!

He was not kept long in suspense, and his pulse leaped quickly as he caught sight of the broad smile upon that motherly face when Mrs. Deakin came bustling back.

"You have seen her, then, dear Mrs. Deakin?"

"And she'll see you, which is better yet!" laughed the landlady, but lifting a hand to check his impetuous rising at the same time. "Now, don't you spoil everything by flying off the handle, Mr. Surry. To-be-sure I've told the dear child pretty much how it all happened; but as I didn't know it all, of course you've got it all to do over again."

"And she will listen? You are sure there's no mistake? She said I might call?"

"There's no mistake, unless you make it, my boy," with a motherly frown and smile, blending into one kindly look. "I'd be blinder than a bat at noonday, if I didn't see that something has gone wrong betwixt you two, in times gone by. But now—be your own honest self, and don't let a trifle build a great wall betwixt you—don't now!"

Steel Surry smiled, but it was a feeble effort. Although he felt that he might possibly succeed in clearing his record, so far as the past few hours were concerned, he knew there was more lying beyond, and that might not be so readily removed.

"I'll do my level best, Mother Nancy, and if I succeed, I know who will be entitled to my first thanks."

"Not first, big boy! Second will do for me, but first—go along with you! If Elias should—"

"You can give them back in his presence,

Mother Nancy, and he can keep tally if he's fearful of being cheated," laughed the Sport from Sunrise, leaving the good dame with cheeks more rosy than usual.

But he was grave enough when he opened the door to the dingy little "parlor," where Enid Fairclough was sitting, pale with expectancy. And if Mother Nancy had waited long enough to take note of their greeting, her warm heart surely would have taken a chill!

A mutual how, some murmured words of greeting, hardly to be caught by their own ears. Not even a touch of the hand, for Steel Surry felt that he had yet to win the right to offer his.

"I can hardly find the words I hoped would visit my tongue, Miss Fairclough," he stammered, as he sunk into a chair, some little distance removed from the lounge which afforded Enid a seat.

"You are—you have recovered from your—your illness, sir?"

That still more unsteady speech lent him a bit of courage, and with a hot flush mounting to his brows, Steel Surry spoke quickly:

"In body, yes, Miss Fairclough! In mind or heart—no! When I look back over last night, and see how madly I acted, it almost drives me crazy again! How can you bring yourself to meet the person who so narrowly escaped hurling you to a frightful death over—"

"I beg of you not to mention that, Mr. Surry!"

Despite her efforts to the contrary, Enid turned pale and shivered at that memory. And once more the spell seemed to fall over the tongue of the sport, leaving him almost helpless to plead his cause, or his excuse.

Then, as though malicious fate took particular delight in baffling even such faint hopes, a quick, springy footfall echoed in the bare hall, rapidly drawing nearer. The door was opened, to admit Digby Fairclough, who paused abruptly on the threshold as he caught sight of a figure seated opposite that of his sister.

The light was too dim for him to at once recognize Surry, but when Sir Steel rose from his chair and faced that way, a sound of anger escaped the young man's lips.

"What! you—and here? Enid, oblige me by returning to your room at once!"

"Excuse me, Mr. Fairclough, but I claim the right to be heard before being utterly condemned," said Surry, once more cool and collected, his old self at last.

"You were heard—and condemned—last night, sir!"

"As a gentleman, sir, you will grant me another chance. And first, permit me to express my heartfelt thanks for the great service you rendered me last night. Only for you those toughs would have laid me out, once for all."

Fairclough was just a bit taken aback by that cool yet clearly sincere speech. He had totally forgotten that part of the past, but he quickly rallied.

"Don't mention it, sir, for it's not worth wasting breath over. I saw what I believed was a man too drunk to help himself, and so I did the best I knew how to relieve him. Let that pass."

"Begging pardon again, Mr. Fairclough, but that is just what I can't afford to do," quickly said Surry, his face very pale, but his voice resolute and even. "From even you, sir, I have a right to claim a chance to clear my record."

"I care nothing for your record. Call it clear as ice and pure as the undrifted snow, if it likes you, sir! 'Tis all the same to me."

"But not to me, sir, and even you can't well deny that I am the one who has by far the most at stake. I can only dimly recall the past, but even that little is enough to convince me I must have acted like a madman, back on the stage-trail."

"You certainly did not act like—a gentleman, sir!" bowed Digby Fairclough, with a sneering emphasis on that title.

"Brother!"

"I am your brother, and as such, I ask you to leave this room with me—at once, Enid!"

The girl glanced toward the man who was so bravely seeking an opportunity for clearing his besmirched record, and meeting his manly yet beseeching gaze, she betrayed a spirit which even her brother had never yet given her credit for.

"You are wrong, and Mr. Surry is right, brother Digby," she said, in clear, firm tones. "He is asking no more than one gentleman owes to another: a chance to clear away an unfortunate misunderstanding. I for one am ready to hear him to the end. Must I listen alone, Digby?"

New though this aspect was, the young man had wit enough to see that harsh opposition could only make a bad matter worse, and so he turned toward Sir Steel, coldly saying:

"Since Miss Fairclough wishes it, sir, say on."

"A thousand thanks for the permission," with a bow which included both brother and sister. "I will cut my explanation as short as may be, in mercy to your patience, but—I must tell you all, or nothing!"

"Nothing, for choice! But—you are keeping us waiting, sir!"

Without further delay Sir Steel told how.

while on his way back to Break-neck, that strange adventure had befallen him. He could not recall everything, but he remembered a mountain lion, a shot, a fall from his horse, after which he seemed to be fighting for his life, suspended over a vast pit of darkness and death.

"I know not how I was rescued from that death, for the next I can recall with any clearness, is being inside a dimly-lighted room, of a rude cabin, apparently, together with two men, one white, and the other black.

"I fancy they must have saved my life, though I can with difficulty reconcile such a generous deed with what followed after! For, after having bound me, my life was threatened; just why, I cannot even guess!

"Then, I remember we were seated at a table, with food and drink before us. There was hot coffee—I recall that, distinctly! It gave forth such a delicious aroma, that, when a cup was offered me, I drank it down, nearly scalding hot. And then—I felt that I was poisoned, and tried to accuse them of murdering me! Instead, I was drugged to insensibility!"

Through all, Enid had listened with great interest, and now she gave an exclamation of wondering sympathy which brought a grateful light to the eyes of the sport.

"Drugged! Why should they do that, after having saved your life?" she ejaculated perplexedly.

"I do not know, unless—unless it was because I told them my real name," hesitated Sir Steel. "When he first heard it, the white man seemed greatly agitated, and, later, he showed fierce anger. Why, I can't imagine, unless because one of the same name belonged to a Tontine—"

A warning gesture from Digby Fairclough cut his explanation short.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WORDS THROWN AWAY.

SIR STEEL might have made that break a little less noticeable, perhaps, had this young gentleman given him greater cause for gratitude, but Digby did his best to cover it over by hurriedly asking:

"When you spoke of food and drink being set before you, Mr. Surry, did you mean that—or—"

"I meant coffee, not whisky or other intoxicating drinks, sir," the sport coldly supplied. "Not a drop of so-called liquor has passed my lips for over a month, and I never was under its influence in all my life. Is that speaking plainly enough, sir?"

"Then I owe you an apology for certain words I uttered last evening," said Fairclough, with a stiff bow. "I could account for your actions in no other manner, but since you have, my amends are due."

There are words that drop from the lips alone, where others are born in the heart. Of the first was that painfully polite apology, and while Sir Steel bowed his acknowledgment, Enid flushed painfully. She felt the sting, if he did not.

As she had once before, the honest, true-hearted girl made what amends she could for another's omission, and almost before he knew it, Steel Surry felt her cool hand clasped in his, while her voice was sounding in his ears:

"I don't pretend to understand it all, Mr. Surry, but this much I do know: you have been terribly wronged, and I, for one, strongly sympathize with you. Are you quite sure you have recovered from your hurts? If only for the sake of your friends, you must not overtask your strength too quickly."

"If I might number you among those friends, Miss Fairclough?"

Enid flushed warmly beneath that ardent gaze, but her hand was withdrawn, and even Sir Steel realized that he was making haste too quickly.

Digby Fairclough touched an arm, speaking coldly:

"Have we given you the chance you craved, sir?"

"It has been granted, and I am more than grateful," quickly amended the sport, his bow almost pointedly directed toward Enid, though he in part smoothed it over by adding: "And if you are satisfied that I was not wholly accountable for my crazy conduct of last evening, sir, I am ready to leave the rest to time and truth."

"Your word to that effect is sufficient, but it has the backing of your physician, who declared you the irresponsible victim to a drug, the nature of which he perfectly understood."

While speaking, Digby contrived to place himself between the other two, and without actual rudeness on his own part, Sir Steel could not do more than make his adieux to the young lady, across that far from friendly barrier.

Digby bore him company to the door, and from there he called over a shoulder to his sister:

"I'll be back shortly, dear, to tell you something you'll be greatly pleased to hear. Wait for me if you like."

Without giving her a fair chance to reply, Digby closed the door behind them, speaking in low tones to the sport:

"Can you spare me a minute or two of your time, Mr. Surry?"

"An hour, if you can get away with as much."

"Far less than that will satisfy me, but—shall we walk? As you have noticed, I didn't wish my sister to hear what you might have to say on that Tontine question, and this hall is hardly the safest place imaginable for secret communications!"

For reasons which are by no means difficult to imagine, Sir Steel was quite willing to grant a private interview, and together the young men left the hotel, slowly moving down the center of the street.

"I believe you started to say that a relative of yours once belonged to a certain Tontine, Mr. Surry?" began Fairclough.

"Not exactly. I said that one of the same name had been a member, or I seriously misjudged the cause of the powerful agitation shown by the white man—whose name, by the way, I believe to have been Mayo Galloway."

Though speaking with seeming carelessness, Sir Steel was fully on the alert, and as he saw that swift flush leap to those cheeks, he knew his shot had taken full effect.

Digby Fairclough passed over the name as though it held no interest or significance in his ears, to ask:

"What reason did he give you for thinking that, Mr. Surry?"

"Did you never have an impression which you felt was truthful, yet which you found it difficult to express in clear terms, Fairclough? I have, and this is one of them. No doubt, if it hadn't been for that drugged cup of coffee, I could give you a better explanation for my belief."

"As matters stand, I can only dimly recall the fact—for fact so much of that nasty ordeal surely is!—that Mayo Galloway tried to take my life, because of one Surry who formed a unit in the notorious Tontine, so often mentioned in print, of late years."

"If you hadn't cut me short in yonder, Fairclough, I would have warned you then, as I warn you now, to beware how you place too great a trust in your uncle or his negro companion!"

"My uncle?" echoed Digby, taken squarely aback.

"Surely, I have not fallen into error?" asked Surry, with brows lifting in much greater surprise than he actually felt. "Mayo Galloway is your uncle, is he not? I certainly heard, from good authority, that your mother had a brother by that name."

"But—a person such as you describe, could hardly be an uncle such as—hardly be my relative!" stammered the young man.

"For your sake, Fairclough, I try to hope I'm mistaken," gravely added Sir Steel, resolved to make the most of the chance fate had thrown in his way. "Still, the name is not one frequently met with, and if you have been led to this wild section by any thought or hope of finding such a relative, let me beg you to move cautiously, if only for the—for your own sake!"

There was a brief period of silence, during which Digby moved along with head bowed and gaze upon the ground. Then he said:

"My mother had such a brother, much older than she was. We lost sight of him, many years ago. This may possibly be the same, but—is it too much to ask you for a closer description of those two men?"

"I only wish I could do it better," said Surry, then drawing as accurate a portrait as his misty memory would permit.

Fairclough readily recognized the giant negro whom he had met in the hills not long before, but he shook his head over the other likeness, generously leaving Sir Steel to imagine his negation applied to both, if he saw fit!

"I fail to place him, but, after all, I'm not so sure it matters, or is worth the trouble I have put you to, Mr. Surry."

"Never mention it, for it cost me nothing. Or, if you wish to repay me, promise to call on me if you should need assistance in gaining the object which has brought you so far from home. Will you, Fairclough?"

"I hardly think that necessity will arise," coldly bowed the other. "Even if I should feel the need of help, though, you are hardly one on whom I would feel at liberty to call."

"You are fond of plain speaking, surely!"

"One must talk plain, at times, in order to make one's self fully understood, Mr. Surry," with another pointed bow. "And now, must I look for other lodgings?"

"Why should you?"

"For Miss Fairclough's sake."

Sir Steel flushed hotly, for he could not pretend to miss the full meaning of that crisp speech. It stung sharply, and for a single breath Digby Fairclough came perilously near a knock-down.

As it was, Surry's voice could hardly be recognized as he forced back his fierce passions, to slowly, almost painfully utter:

"It is extremely fortunate that Miss Fairclough is your sister, sir, for if she was not—well, I'll pay your own price if you bring any other man to receive the answer true love for her hinders my giving you—squarely in the mouth

you use to insult a gentleman, whose hands you know are tied!"

Without waiting for an answer, Sir Steel strode rapidly away, leaving the young New Yorker flushed with mingled rage and mortification.

This was hardly the manner in which he intended that interview should end, but the matter was beyond mending, just then; and smothering his emotions as well as he might, Fairclough turned and made his way back to the Tip-top House.

He found Enid awaiting his return, in the little parlor, and as he caught her anxious look of inquiry, Digby forced a smile, then plunged at once into the question which had brought them to Break-neck, as the surest method of avoiding awkward questions.

"I've met the man who wrote that letter, little lady!"

"What! not—not Uncle Mayo?"

"Not Uncle Mayo, but Uncle Sam," he laughingly retorted, then dropping down on the lounge by her side, to talk more at ease, as well as run less risk of having their words caught by other ears. "And that Uncle Sam, is black as the proverbial ace of spades, too! Though, so far as my limited experience goes, that particular spade is usually blue!"

"What do you mean, Digby? When did you—why don't you tell me all about it, sir?"

"Why don't you give me time, little hot-head?"

Content with having led his sister fairly away from the breakers, Fairclough gave an accurate account of his little adventure of that morning, the first portion of which has already been placed before the reader. And from that point he continued:

"He said that, for reasons which would be satisfactorily explained at the proper time, Mayo Galloway could not come to meet us here, but begged that we would grant him a private interview at a point to be named after we consented to meet him."

"Why so much mystery, Digby? Can it be that—that he is not a good man? Can it be—surely he is not the cruel being who so terribly abused Mr. Surry?"

"Don't be a silly, Enid! Of course I told the black that such a thing was out of the question, so far as you were concerned, and—"

"Nor must you run such a foolish risk brother!"

"That's different, child. I'm a man, and supposed to be able to care for myself."

"Is not he a man, as well? If he is what he claims to be, why does he not prove it by coming here, plain and above-board? You must not go to any such meeting, brother!" impulsively cried the maiden.

"You're foolish, child! I am going, for I made an appointment for to-morrow. What else could I do? After coming all this weary way, was I to spoil all by rearing back on my dignity and—Pah!"

"Well, if you are so set on going, I know nothing I might say would shake your resolution. But—you'll take help with you, Digby?"

"A regiment, if that will make you any easier in mind, little one!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TOM INKSTONE REPORTS.

It was growing dusk, when Kate Pilkington sprang quickly to her feet, a peculiar signal tingling in her ears.

"Word coming, brother!" she exultantly exclaimed, as she sprung forward to fling wide the front door.

The hot flush swiftly fled from her cheeks as she caught sight of that face and figure, so different from the ones she confidently expected to see; but before she could say a word, Tom Inkstone stepped over the threshold, doffing his hat and giving a bow which included Hard Pill as well.

"You, is it?" almost snarled the red-bearded giant, as he sprung to his feet. "Shut the door, Kate! And now—what devil's luck fetches you here, Tom Inkstone?"

"Good luck, boss, or I'm no judge!" hastily said the spy, shrinking toward a corner, one hand lifted appealingly. "We've found 'em!"

"Found them?" echoed Pilkington, his clinched hand slowly sinking, though the scowl deepened upon his face, rather than grew lighter.

"Found 'em, for a sober fact, sir!"

"Then why are you here? Didn't I leave orders for Fritz England to bring word, while you stood guard?"

"If you'll just simmer a bit, brother," interposed Kate, who had been making a swift study of that face the while, "maybe Tom can explain everything, even to your satisfaction."

"I reckon I can, just that," nodded the fellow, with returning confidence. "If I can't, then I'm up for punishment, though I acted for what I thought the very best, sir."

"I'll decide that point, myself," growled Hard Pill, sinking back into his seat, while Kate placed a chair for the spy. "Go on, and cut it as short as you know how."

"Without leaving out any of the fine points, though, Inkstone," the woman coolly amended.

"Talk freely, and if you're not to blame, I'll go your bail against my brother."

"Thank'ee, ma'am," with a grateful bow, then turning more particularly to Hardress, he began his report. "You know how you left us, boss, and I don't reckon you've forgotten the idee Fritz hatched up when we found t'other way was blocked in?"

"I remember. Go on."

"Well, Bones hit the bull's-eye, first clatter! There was n'other way of getting out of the trap, and first thing we knew, come 'long well past midnight, a light showed itself nigh the middle of that rock wall! And out of that light, we saw something come moving slowly down the face of the cliff, to stop right at its foot."

"There wasn't quite as much light as we'd like to have had, just then, but we managed to make out pretty well how the trick was turned: a rope-and-basket sort of rigging, and the nigger it was who came down."

"I hope you killed the rascal!" impetuously broke in the woman.

"Them wasn't orders, ma'am," quickly said Inkstone. "And if we had tried it on, we couldn't 'a' done it quick enough to bag t'other duck, for up flew the rigging, like a wink!"

"That was near midnight, you say? Yet here it is almost night again, and you only bring word, after so long a time?" asked Pilkington, with a calmness doubly dangerous in a man of his violent passions.

"Isn't it better to fetch whole news, than just a tenth, boss?"

"Prove it, if you can, Thomas."

"Well, boss, you know what Bony is: as good a spy as ever lay nose to a cold trail, but for grit—he don't show a color in a ton! He 'lowed he'd foller the buck, but I felt him shiver in his boots, so I thought better to take that part on my own shoulders. I know 'twas against orders, boss," anticipating that storm before it could fairly break, "and if I'd made botch-work of it, maybe I'd be tempted to lie to ye, for just this once."

"Don't be too honest, Tom," laughingly said Kate.

"I wouldn't, ma'am, only I've got good news to more'n balance it. Still, I 'lowed to drop in here, when the nigger led me clean to town, but I was afraid to drop him long enough, after I saw him talking for a bit with a fellow he picked up, down the street."

"Who was it? What did they say?"

"I didn't hear a word, boss. They was together only a bit, and before I could creep up close enough, the nigger was on his way back to the hills. But he made one or two stops on the way, seeming terribly worked up 'bout something, and I heard him say to himself that it'd be all right to-morrow—meanin' this day, you understand?"

"Go on. You're dragging it out to a frightful length, man!"

"It'll all fit in, ma'am, and if I left any bit out now, mebbe we'd lose still more time by having to feel back for it. And so, to cut it short, boss, I run the nigger back to the hole, and when he came to the bottom of the rock, right there I picked up plenty to save me from harm through breaking orders—I just did, sir!"

"What do you mean, man?"

"That I heard the nigger give a signal—one that I've practiced ever since, until I could fool even his ears, boss!"

"Glory enough! the game is won, all but raking it in!" exclaimed Kate Pilkington, in fierce exultation. "Tom Inkstone, you're a jewel!"

Rather oddly, it was Hard Pill who showed cool caution, just then. His eyes were filled with an evil glow, but his words came coldly:

"Don't fly off the handle too sudden, sister. Wait until Tom has emptied his budget, and you may spare your breath, after all."

"There's nothing worse to come, sir, and unless I'm off my nut, it's even better word than I've told, already!"

"So you say, but I'm doing the judging. Go on, and get it over."

With his spirits a little dashed by that unexpectedly cool reception, Tom Inkstone picked up the broken thread, giving a fair imitation of the signal which he had caught, then telling how a light showed far up the face of the cliff, followed almost immediately by the same contrivance by means of which Uncle Sam had descended from the refuge, at an earlier hour.

"Why didn't you send Fritz here with the word, as I bade you?"

"Well, we talked it all over, boss, counting the words I picked up on the way back, and we reckoned we'd best make sure of the hole before going any further. So we kept eye on the very spot, hardly daring to wink, even! And then, just as it was getting light enough to begin to see clear, boss, down pops the nigger again!"

"You followed him, of course?"

"You bet, I did! And right there comes in another big slice of luck, unless my eyes caught a crooked twist, staring so long through the dark! For, taking his easy, the nigger made his way over nigh town, stopping up yonder on the high rocks, acting just as though he was waiting and watching for somebody to come there to meet him!"

"Hurry, you wind-bag! Did they come?"

"Two of 'em, boss!"

"The boy and girl, for a ducat!" exclaimed Kate.

"I didn't see no girl, though one of 'em was rigged out neat 'nough to have been one, in disguise," chuckled the spy, plainly enjoying the sensation his report was creating. "And then the nigger dodged furdur back 'mong the rocks, and it was not until town was lost sight of that he let 'em come up with him."

"You heard what was said, of course?"

"I couldn't, boss, 'thout showing up too plain, and I knew that would kick all the fat into the fire. I just watched and waited, then dogged the nigger back to his den. When I saw him get in there, I reckoned it was high time I struck out for town."

"It took you all this time? You said the nigger started out at break of day! Careful, man! If I catch you tripping, I'll—"

"Serve me mighty right, too! But I couldn't find the feller I was looking for, in a hurry, boss, and when I did find him, it took up a heap more time getting on his blind side."

"What fellow are you talking about?"

"Johnny Bowles, the fellow who took the dude to meet Uncle Sam."

"What did you want of him? What did he know?"

"I never asked, out flat, boss, for I'm noways hungry to taste the secrets of my betters."

"What did you—where is he now?"

"Outside, waiting to see if he's wanted, sir!"

Then the desperado's pent-up rage burst forth, and with a single leap he crossed that space, and had Tom Inkstone gripped by each shoulder, actually gnashing teeth in his face, as he snarled:

"You fool! If you think to play me double—"

"Cut my heart out, master, and I'll eat it raw!" boldly spoke up the spy, making not the slightest effort to free himself from that terrible clutch, though finger-tips were bruising his tough flesh.

"I'll do it! I ought to do it now! How dare you—"

Just how far that mad rage would have led the giant, it is hard to predict, but once again Kate Pilkington interfered, with courage as cool as her wit was keen.

No woman could have broken that grip by exerting her physical powers, and there was no time to be wasted in argument. So, flashing forth a knife, Kate drew the bright steel swiftly across both of those hairy paws, causing Hard Pill to jerk his hands back, with an involuntary cry of angry dismay.

"Only the back, brother!" with a low laugh of triumph, not unmixed with scorn, as he glared at his unwounded paws. "Now, get down to sober reason, and let honest Tom have his say out. I will it!"

"If he has dared let an outsider into our game—"

"But he hasn't, that I'll go bail. Am I right, Inkstone?"

"Gospel couldn't be truer, ma'am," huskily mumbled the spy, as he caught her unarmed hand and pressed his hot lips to it. "I acted for what I thought the best, but if I'm wrong, then no harm's done. It's only sending Johnny Bowles back, no wiser than he came!"

"You say you brought him here with you?"

"He's within call, but he don't know what I fetched him for, nor he don't know that anybody lives here that has anything to do with the job I hinted I might be able to throw in his way."

"What is it you're trying to get at, Tom Inkstone?" growlingly asked Hard Pill, rallying from that humiliating surprise.

"Just this, boss: The nigger seems afraid to go into town. He got Bowles to act for him. Now, if you care to trap the young fellow who came out to meet the buck, I reckon it can be done by having Johnny to help us. If not, still you can use him to trap the nigger, and maybe the old man, as well: for I'm sure they mean to meet again to-morrow!"

"You say you'll answer for this Johnny Bowles, Inkstone?"

"I say he can be bought over, if you care to use him that way, boss," came the guarded response. "Shall I fetch him in, for you to judge?"

"Yes, go bring him in, Tom," and as she spoke, Kate opened the door, closing it again as he left, then turning swiftly upon Hard Pill.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TRICK THAT COUNTS.

THE new day was barely beginning to break in the east, and it was still quite dark among the rocks and scrubby bushes which lay near the base of the perforated ridge in which Mayo Galloway and his faithful servant had found a temporary refuge.

Even their keen eyes, sharpened by the perils through which they had been forced to pass of late, would have failed to detect aught of human life lurking there amidst that cover; yet such there surely was!

Guided by Tom Inkstone, Hardress Pilkington had parted with Kate, his reputed sister, and

leaving her to carry out a portion of the evil schemes which they had only that night perfected, he hastened through the hills, eager to close his pitiless grip on one or both of his long-hunted enemies.

Fritz England was found on duty, and from him it was learned that no fresh movement had taken place since the departure of Inkstone, with the important news.

"They're snoozin', I reckon, boss," the man of bones ventured to add, in his high glee at seeing Hard Pill pass over that change in the programme without mention. "An' ef 'twasn't fer wakin' of 'em up by the scratchin' sounds, I do reckon a critter mought climb his way up to the hole, yender, 'thout nothin' better'n his owu hooks an' paddles!"

Pilkington stored up that hint for possible use in the future, then followed the imaginary line marked out by Tom Inkstone, until his eyes fairly settled on the spot where, according to his spies, the entrance to that secret refuge surely lay.

Of his own eyes, the desperado could see nothing of greater significance than in any one of a dozen different points, higher, lower, to right hand or to left; but with his men so positive, he could not well give them the lie.

"If you're right, and the trick works well, boys, I'll pay you bigger wages than you ever earned in fifty times as long!" was his almost nervous assertion.

A man of action, above all else, this protracted delay, this working so slowly, under cover, as it might be termed, was playing the mischief with the nerves of the giant desperado. Where it was a reckless rush, a slap-dash affair, Hardress Pilkington could more than hold his end level, let who might be at the other.

There were very few words spoken between the trio as they lay under cover, for everything had been arranged beforehand, so far as the unknown could be provided for.

"I hain't skeered but what it'll pan out all right, boss," Tom Inkstone quietly whispered, when his master showed signs of uneasy doubt. "So much trouble wouldn't be tuck to make an appointment, then throw it all away by slipping up on their side. They'll come down, in time."

Then, when the first rays of the morning sun were gilding the highest crags, this prophecy seemed on the point of fulfillment.

"Sast!" passed Tom Inkstone's lips, as his hand gripped Hard Pill by the arm lying nearest him. "Don't you hear! Now—they're coming, boss!"

That warning was a waste of breath, however, for the red-haired giant had not only caught that suspicious sound, but his keen eyes were already taking note of a slowly moving object at the exact point on which his attention had been fixed for so long a spell.

His first thought was that Uncle Sam or Mayo Galloway was taking observations, to decide whether or no the coast was clear; but a few seconds later he realized his mistake.

"They're rigging the purchase fer to come down by, boss!" again mumbled Inkstone, too highly elated with the success of his ideas to keep his tongue in bonds.

"Button, curse ye!" snarled Hard Pill, lowly.

He could make out something, like the spy had described in his report as a "sort of rope-and-basket" rigging, being swung clear of the cliff, but as he watched a little longer, his doubts began to grow in proportion as his hopes fell.

He saw a figure, by far too bulky for him to mistake it for other than Uncle Sam, fumbling with the contrivance, then, standing in the puckered bag of untanned hide, make use of the doubled rope to lower himself easily down the face of the rock.

"Alone! Just the nigger!"

"He'll let the boss down, later, mumbled Inkstone, though with a good bit less assurance than he had been feeling. "But, if he don't we can still play the other trick!"

Only an inarticulate growl gave him answer. Speech would be too risky, now, and with almost breathless interest they awaited the end.

Uncle Sam reached the base of the cliff in safety, then, stepping out of the bag, he sent it rapidly up the face of the rock. Was it to fetch Mayo Galloway down, to help him keep that appointment?

Hardress Pilkington and his fellows were ardently hoping that this might be the case, but they were fated to suffer disappointment. The rope was swiftly drawn up to the refuge, and with a low whistle, as if to let his master know all was working well with him, Uncle Sam walked rapidly away, heading for the southwest, in which direction lay the town of Break-neck.

The two spies covertly glanced at their master, but neither of them dared say a word, or give an audible hint.

'Twould be easy to drop that black Hercules with a shot, and all of them would feel much safer were he put out of the way, once for all.

But Hardress Pilkington made no sign, lying there under cover, gnawing his thumbs as he sullenly glared after that rapidly receding figure. Not until Uncle Sam had vanished from

their sight, did he move or speak, but then he was active enough.

"We've got to fall back on Kate's plan, after all, boys. That's where we're in big luck, too! I couldn't have looked so far ahead, but—Do me up the best you know how, Tom."

There was not so much to do, simply because so little could be done. Beyond a tolerable resemblance in size and build, one could hardly have picked out two persons who less resembled each other than Uncle Sam and Hardress Pilkington.

The upper portion of a black stocking—of generous girth, yet elastic enough to stretch still wider—had been supplied by Kate, and drawing this down over head and face, Inkstone cutting twin slits through which his eyes could do their duty, red was changed to black, thus doing away with the most difficult portion of the matter.

Beyond this, a hasty shifting of garments to more nearly resemble the manner in which Uncle Sam was clothed, was all that could be done. Fritz England stole back with the report that, so far as his keen eyes had been able to trace him, the negro had pressed directly on toward Break-neck, and was now well beyond earshot.

"All right! You understand what you're to do, I reckon?"

"Sure! To nab the old cuss as quick as you've brought him down from the nest, boss!"

"Right! See that you make no mistakes, then, or—"

Hard Pill left that threat incomplete, possibly reflecting that it could hardly stir his tools up to better work, after all.

Not a sign of life showed at yonder hidden hole, and feeling that there was nothing to be gained by waiting longer, Pilkington, slouching his hat the better to shadow his face in case watch was really being kept by the hermit refugee, crept away until fairly in the line taken by the black when he hastened away.

Rising up, and running directly toward the cliff, when he came to a point which he had already marked in his mind, Pilkington flung up his arms and fell; to all seeming, the trip and fall of a man who has met with an awkward accident.

A sharp cry broke from his lips as he went down, and then, while counterfeiting a struggle, he gave the signal which Tom Inkstone had first made known to the desperado; a fair imitation of the call which Uncle Sam was accustomed to use on his return to his master.

Almost immediately there came a movement midway that rock-wall, and as that struggling figure over yonder repeated his signal, the anxious voice of Mayo Galloway floated across the space, with the words:

"Is that—what's the matter, boy?"

"Hurt—fell down and—oh!" his voice growing hoarser and less natural, as with excruciating pain. "My leg! I've broken my ankle, master!"

"Nol I can't believe it! Try again, Sam, and maybe—"

Just as the genuine Uncle Sam would have done, this counterfeit seemed to struggle against nature, dragging himself along for a few feet, only to sink down again, where his form was even more wholly hidden from too close scrutiny by those anxious eyes up yonder!

But, unlike the genuine, this base imitation gave a groan and a cry of mingled pain and despair, before saying:

"I can't—it's all—the bone's sticking through so—for love of heaven, master! help me!"

It was a wretched imitation, though Hard Pill did as well as might have been expected. A brute of his caliber could not even copy a man such as Uncle Sam had proven himself.

Only for that signal, added to a glimpse of a black face, as it seemed, Mayo Galloway might not have been caught in the trap, cunningly though all was planned, and fairly well though all was played. But now, choking back a groan at this fresh calamity, he thought only of how he could quickest and best rescue his faithful friend and servant.

"Bear up, Sam!" he quavered, as he swung the rope and tackle out from its usual hiding-place. "I'm coming! Maybe it's not so bad as you fear, and—I'm coming, dear friend!"

Another groan from the decoy brought that second cry of cheer, and stepping into the hide basket, Mayo Galloway grasped the rope that controlled all, lowering himself rapidly down the face of the rock, never for an instant dreaming of the snare which was even then closing about him!

He struck ground with a bump! and before he could lift a foot out of that rude basket, or bag, Tom Inkstone and Fritz England sprang up from the rocks to which they had crawled while their master was preparing his fall, beyond.

"Make a yelp, and ye'll die!" snarled Inkstone, as his strong arms closed around the refugee, from behind. "Grab his boots, Fritz! Ho, boss! we've got him!"

"Keep your grip!" hoarsely cried the desperado, tearing off the stocking disguise, to leave his eyes free and his face uncovered. "I'm coming! Let him slip now, and I'll eat ye living and raw!"

Swift as were his great strides, Hard Pill found his tools had cast their captive to earth, and had him perfectly helpless to do more than glare defiantly at his face, as he came upon the scene.

"I've got you now, you sfi'ppery devil!" Hard Pill cried, in vicious triumph. "Who'll reap the benefit of that Tontine? Who—but me!"

CHAPTER XXX.

KEEPING HIS APPOINTMENT.

WITHOUT a hint as to the deadly trap which was being baited just behind him, Uncle Sam picked his way among those thick-lying rocks, bound for the rendezvous given him by Digby Fairclough, after such a warm discussion of matters and terms, while Johnny Bowles lazily waited the result.

To a certain degree, the faithful black was troubled in mind, for he had been unable to coax or reason his master into making good the pledge he had given young Fairclough.

"If he cares to see me, bring him here with you, boy," doggedly said the refugee, when all was told. "Not exactly here, but wait with him over yonder, among the rocks. Give the old signal, and I'll come down, for at least one square look at the boy. Only that! Make no positive pledges, Sam, until after I've seen and summed the youngster up!"

Such was the message which Uncle Sam was bearing to Digby Fairclough, instead of taking him a relative so long lost sight of. And yet, the black giant moved as though on springs, and his usually grave countenance was lighted up by many a passing smile.

For the first time, on the night before, he had learned of the double tragedy which not only took from life the two worst enemies Mayo Galloway had, but left him sole owner of a magnificent fortune, the accumulations of almost a half-century, principal and interest!

This it was that rendered the faithful black so unlike himself when he first met young Fairclough, and this explains his wildly excited manner as recalled by Tom Inkstone while making his report to the Pilkingtons.

"At last!" he ejaculated, flinging up his hands, to clasp them in almost devout gratitude. "His life is safe, for now his death could only ruin their evil hopes! Thank God—thank God!"

As already noted, it was a long trip through the hills to Break-neck, and though the actual rendezvous lay some little distance out in the hills, Digby Fairclough and his guide, Johnny Bowles, had been waiting there for some little time before they caught sight of the negro making his approach.

Contrary to the promise he had given Enid, Fairclough had taken no one with him, save his guide. He had no such intention, as his laughing consent ought to have warned the maiden, but he had granted her no fair chance to argue the matter, and she had taken his word as understood.

Why should he think any help necessary? Even if this giant negro, who seemed a negro only in looks, was trying to fool him, was he not a man grown, plenty able to care for himself? If any one thought not, let them put him to the test, and abide the result!

"Thar's the nigger, boss!" muttered Bowles, his eye first catching sight of the messenger as he topped those crags. "Reckon you don't keef fer any more ears than them ye tote, so I'll jest slouch back a bit?"

That sentence took on the form of a question, but no answer came, and taking it for granted, Bowles fell back a few yards.

"Alone! what does that mean?" muttered Fairclough, frowningly, as he failed to catch sight of a second figure. "Surely, if 'twas our uncle, he would come with the black fellow?"

This wonder, which was speedily growing into a cloud of suspicion, led to a very cold reception as Uncle Sam came up, saluting.

"Where's your master? I'm here, on time, but he—where is he?" bluntly demanded the young New Yorker, without deigning to acknowledge that greeting.

"He could not come, young master," almost humbly replied the negro, twirling his dilapidated hat in his hands, as he gazed wistfully into that haughty face. "He hoped—I hope—"

"Stop a bit, my fine fellow," came the cold interruption. "You gave your word that if I would come out here, to-day, you would fetch the person you called master, to meet me, I've kept my part of the appointment. Why haven't you been as good as your word?"

"God knows, I tried—tried hard, young master! But—all I could say was of no use! Master refused to come, unless you—"

"Then the agreement is off, and I might as well go back to town!"

"Wait! If you go so, sir, you'll never forgive yourself!" cried Uncle Sam, almost harshly, as he sprang before the young man.

"Possibly you think to hinder my going?" sneered Fairclough, his hot temper rising, even as his hand dropped to his pistol-pocket.

"Not that way, sir," with a faint smile, as his empty hands rose, palms to the front. "I'll never lift a finger against Miss Marcia's child, but in her name, I beg of you to hear me out!"

"What do you know of my mother?"

"I knew her when she was a weenty baby, young master! I saw her the day she was born, and many's the time I've toted her on my back until—but let that pass," his head bowing submissively. "Her spirit is with the angels, and I must talk with the living—of your uncle, sir."

"If he is really my uncle, why is he ashamed to meet me, face to face? Or, if not ashamed, what reason has he for avoiding me?" amending the question as he caught that flash of indignation.

"He is old, young master: old, and terribly shaken by such perils and privations as I'm hoping you'll never know, other than by hearsay! If one must take a toilsome trip, should it not be the younger man?"

"All that might count, if you hadn't made different arrangements, my man. I was promised an interview with my uncle, Mayo Galloway, if I would come out here again. I have come; he has not. Why?"

"I have told you young master, but I'll say it still plainer. He is old, he is weakened in both body and mind by all he has had to undergo, through the devilish persecution of his enemies. For many long years they have hunted him without mercy, and this, naturally enough, makes him very suspicious."

"He secretly longs to meet you both, and I firmly believe that if the young lady would come—"

"Enough of that, sir!" with anger in face and in tones. "The young lady will do nothing of the sort. I was a rank fool for bringing her out to such a wretched place, and I would be worse than an idiot to give a second thought to such an idea!"

"You are too hard, young master," gravely, anxiously said Uncle Sam, betraying none of the anger which he surely would have felt had he merely been pleading his own cause. "Then, if you will go with me to where the master is waiting, that might answer."

Fairclough broke into a scornful laugh, before saying bluntly:

"That is out of the question, almost as much as the other hint, my fine fellow! Stop!" flinging up a hand in time to check Uncle Sam. "I have just so much to say, and I'm going to give it words, plain enough for you to understand, without an interpreter, too!"

"I came all the way here, from New York, on your urgent invitation. If I hadn't been a fool, I'd have tossed your letter aside without giving it a second thought, but I showed it to another, and her urgings led me to yield; for, as she said, blood is thicker than water!"

"I came here, and I have made two trips out to this spot. There is a limit to all things, and I've reached it now. Since your master doesn't think it worth while to come so far, I'll go back, as I came."

Uncle Sam pleaded as well as he was able, but Fairclough remained firm, so far as going any further was concerned. It was with actual reluctance that he made so much of a concession.

"It's no earthly use your asking me to go reason with him. I've reached the limit, as I said before. Still, since you seem so much in earnest, I'll yield just so far: I'll wait here a reasonable length of time—you can name it, since you best know how far from here your master is in hiding—but, if Mayo Galloway does not come to meet me before that grace expires, I'll go back as I came, with the exception of being a good deal wiser!"

"If you go back without meeting my master, sir, you'll regret it all the rest of your life!"

"Is that intended for a threat, my man?"

"No, but it's heaven's own truth, sir! If you miss seeing Mayo Galloway now, you'll repent it to your dying day!"

"On my head be it, then!" said Fairclough, with meek solemnity.

Uncle Sam looked the picture of despair at that, but catching at the only hope which remained, he asked:

"If I promise my best to bring master, sir, will you swear to wait here until the sun is well past the noon-mark?"

"Make a more definite figure, can't you? Will three o'clock be long enough for you to make the round trip?"

"More than enough for me, but for master—he is not so strong and active as I am, though our years are the same."

"Well, if you can win him over to come, you can run on ahead, if the time grows short. I'll stay here until three o'clock. If, at the end of that time you have not put in an appearance I'll shake the dust off my boots, and go back to my belongings. That's final, old fellow!"

Uncle Sam drew closer to the speaker, gazing keenly into his bold blue eyes. He drew a long breath as of relief, for he read only truth in them, besides that firm resolve.

"I accept your terms, young master, and if failure follows, 'twill not be my fault. If I have not master here by that hour, then fate is frowning darkly upon us all!"

Turning, the faithful fellow sprang away at top speed, and as he watched those deer-like bounds, Digby Fairclough could no longer doubt the perfect earnestness of the negro, whatever his master might lack.

"A turrible spry critter, fer sech a hefty,

don't ye reckon, boss?" drawled Johnny Bowles, slouching forward from the flat rock on top of which he had been sunning himself throughout that interview. "An' they do say he's jest as good a man as they make 'em, now'days, too!"

"Good? In what way?" listlessly asked the young gentleman.

"In the way—fightin' way, so to speak, ye know," with a feeble lifting of his brows at such an innocent question. "I reckoned everybody knowed what that meant!"

"I'm not everybody, my dear sir, so I'm excusable, from your own point of light. But—since we've got to wait here a considerable time, suppose you tell me something more about this black fellow? He don't talk, or act, like a common nigger!"

"Which you kin bet he ain't, but a most mighty uncommon nigger!"

From generalizations, Johnny Bowles descended to particulars, drawing forth sundry items well worthy of note, provided one could be sure he was not drawing liberally upon his imagination for his facts.

After this fashion a few moments were spent, and Uncle Sam had passed well beyond sight and hearing. Then, rising to his feet with a yawn, Johnny Bowles stretched out his arms as though fighting off an obstinate sleepy fit.

Instead, he caught Digby Fairclough around the body, giving him a fierce wrench which, added to the complete surprise, brought that young gentleman to earth with a heavy shock! Then—a pistol-shot rung forth!

CHAPTER XXXI.

CAUGHT IN THE SNARE.

It was not until after the noonday meal passed, without bringing Digby to either table or to her, that Enid Fairclough began to worry over his absence.

He had been fairly frank with her, concerning his interview with Uncle Sam, and she was left under the impression that he would not be long detained by this second appointment, if everything passed off as he expected.

As the afternoon wore slowly along, she passed from the parlor to the little side door, by means of which the hotel could be left without passing through the office, which was hardly ever without its quota of men: guests, loafers or such as matters of business called there.

In her very natural anxiety, Enid made this little trip not only once, but at least a half-dozen times. And, though she did not admit as much, even in her heart of hearts, her dark eyes looked for a second figure, very unlike that of the trim, trig New Yorker.

For Steel Surry had likewise passed out of sight, and though Enid, as a matter of course, dared not question even genial Mrs. Deakin concerning the gentleman for whom she had so many and such conflicting thoughts, she felt nearly certain he must have left town, since he made no further attempt to see her!

It was while making one of these brief expeditions, in hopes of seeing her brother on his return, that Enid caught sight of a trim, almost elegant looking shape, hurrying up the street toward the hotel where she was standing.

At first glimpse she gave a little start of pleasure, for she mistook it for Digby, but that error lasted only a moment. The young stranger wore a differently colored suit, nor was he quite so tall as her brother, though equally as well dressed.

Apparently he likewise had an eye for a neat figure and pretty face, for he was gazing keenly that way, and with a flush of color creeping into her cheeks, Enid drew back from the door, returning to the dim little parlor.

Without more than a brief hesitation at the narrow doorway, barely long enough for a keen glance up, down and across the street, this dapper stranger entered the building, marched direct to the parlor door, entering and pushing the barrier almost shut behind him, before he appeared to catch sight of its occupant.

Enid sprang to her feet, almost nervously, but before she could do or say aught, the dark-faced stranger hastily spoke.

"I am right—you are Miss Fairclough?"

"That is my name, but I do not recognize you, sir?" hesitatingly said the maiden, shrinking back a bit further as this stranger stepped forward.

"Of course you don't, ma'am, but when I say that your brother sent me to ask—"

"Digby? Oh, sir, something has happened to—"

"Nothing to frighten you, Miss Fairclough," came the swift, gentle assurance, backed by a flash of white teeth beneath that jetty pair of curling mustaches. "Something has happened, but only the greatest of good luck! He's found an uncle, who is rich enough to smother you both with diamonds, or— But I'm growing impertinent, perhaps?"

"I don't understand!" murmured Enid, losing part of her fears, yet far from feeling at ease beneath those glittering black eyes. "Digby said he would be back early, while— Where is he, sir?"

"Waiting for you, Miss Fairclough," bowed the stranger, in the mildest, most musical of

tones. "The shock of their meeting proved almost too much for your uncle; he is growing old, remember! And so, as the poor old gentleman begged him not to leave him alone, Mr. Fairclough enlisted me as his courier. As soon as you can get hat or bonnet—whichever ladies favor—I'll be most happy to act as your guide."

Enid hesitated, but not for long. How could she suspect danger? And least of all at the hands of this more than polite stranger?

He was so sweetly spoken, yet with a flippant dash which young women find it so difficult to resist at first. Then, too, he was wholly at his ease. Nothing could be further from the usual "bad man," and fairly won over by his glib handling of familiar names, Enid flew up to her chamber, there to put on her traveling-bonnet and veil.

The dapper stranger, who had forgotten to give his name, met her at the foot of the stairs, and gallantly handed her out at the little door, slipping her gloved hand through his bent arm as they struck the unpaved street: its roughness seemed excuse sufficient for even that breach of modern manners.

So glibly was his tongue running, that Enid had no time for a look around, much less a glance behind her, else she might have caught sight of Mother Nancy's ample figure, just then framed in the doorway. With one hand curved over her eyes, the good dame was staring in astonishment after those briskly-moving figures.

"I am hurrying you along too rapidly, Miss Fairclough," asked the stranger, but without in the least slackening the pace he had set from the first. "Sorry, if so, but—he bade me beg you to hurry! There is no time to lose, if you are to get there in time."

"You mean— Uncle is not so ill as that would seem?" panted the maiden, already showing the effects of her hurried progress.

"I wish I could assure you to the contrary, Miss Fairclough, but I know so very little, my own self! I was merely passing by, and was called in, something after the fashion of a messenger boy, you might say, hal hal hal!"

Enid gave a little shiver at that laugh, and drew her hand from his arm. Though mellow enough, something about the sound gave her a feeling of repulsion, though, as yet, she had no thought of being entrapped by one who meant her the worst of evils.

"It's not very much further, Miss Fairclough," said her guide, affecting to believe that change was due to the necessity of managing her skirts, since they passed from the level to a slight incline.

If Enid had been better acquainted with Break-neck, her suspicions might have been awakened before this, if only from the erratic course which this glib-tongued guide took.

He had turned from the main street at the first good chance after leaving the hotel, thus cheating Mother Nancy out of a longer examination. He had veered twice since then, each time with no better excuse than that of confusing the young lady, had she known the truth. And now, having made yet another turn, which would carry them once more into view of the Tip-top House if maintained long enough, the trap was almost ready for springing.

"He is— I thought the meeting was to take place out of town, among the hills?" Enid found breath to say, as her guide hurried her directly toward a small building standing by itself.

"I'm not sure, but I've the impression that they did meet somewhere out yonder," with an indefinite gesture. "But your brother called my attention from this house, and possibly the old gentleman was coming to pay his respects to you, ma'am, when his emotions proved too much for his strength. At all events—here we are, at last!"

Before Enid could fairly wonder why, if all this was truth, Digby was not on the alert to welcome and receive her, the door was flung open, and a strong hand almost thrust her across the threshold!

For its owner to follow instantly, bursting into a hard, mocking laugh as the door swung to behind them, casting all into semi-darkness for the first few moments.

"Digby! Brother—where are you?" Enid called out, terror catching at heart and brain at that rude treatment.

"Caught in the snare, just as you are, silly fool!" cried Kate Pilkington, as her deft fingers turned bolt and bar.

"I don't—who are you, sir?"

"A mighty sight better man than such a silly deserves, and that's no man at all!" mocked the woman, casting aside all disguise as she turned up a low-burning lamp, giving them ample light to see by, without running any risk of being spied upon by means of the window, across which a heavy blanket was pinned.

Oddly enough, and yet true to nature, Enid felt a certain measure of relief as she recognized a woman in that masculine disguise. She looked, as she undoubtedly was, bewildered, but she had sufficient nerve left as yet to look for safety in her own strength, rather than in aimless shrieks and cries.

"Who are you, woman?" she demanded, with fair composure, so far as her tones were

concerned. "Why have you so shamefully lied to me?"

"Who says I've lied to you, baby?"

"You said my brother—where is he, then?" casting an involuntary glance around the little room.

"I said I was sent to fetch you to join your brother and your uncle. I am going to take you to them both, never fear!" said Kate, with a low, sneering laugh that sent a cold chill creeping over Enid.

"Where is he, then? Digby! Brother! Come to me!"

Kate Pilkington sprang closer to the maiden as she began to lift her voice in that appeal, and as a bright blade flashed before her eyes, poor Enid almost lost her voice as she shrunk back.

"Peace, you little idiot!" harshly cried the unsexed woman, swiftly playing that deadly weapon before face and eyes until Enid fell back, step by step, her retreat checked only by the wall of the room. "Must I use this dainty bodkin to pin your silly lips together? I can do it! I'd really love to do it! Only—it might spoil your kisses for your handsome bridegroom, little pet!"

"I don't—spare me, for—"

"Bah!" with a sudden fierceness in face and voice, as she held the poor girl motionless against the wall, through dread of that thin point of steel. "Why should I spare you? You, who have come so far, expressly to dash into the dust the hopes for which we have struggled so long and so desperately?"

"I don't know— I never harmed you!" faltered Enid.

"Nor ever shall, please Satan!" mocked the other, with a low, vicious laugh. "Harm? You? A silly fool, who caught at a lure an infant ought to have avoided? What harm could such an idiot do to a woman of my caliber? So little harm, that I'm not afraid to face my hand before your eyes!"

There was something so devilish in those glittering black eyes as they stared into her face, that Enid, ignoring the blade that still flashed before her, burst into a wild scream for help!

Kate Pilkington flung aside her weapon, to catch the poor girl by the throat, choking off her shrieks and flinging her to the floor at one and the same time.

With a dexterity that betokened practice, she applied both gag and bonds, then sprang to her feet, with a low, mocking laugh, to say:

"Now, deary, I reckon you'll be ready to submit when your gallant bridegroom comes to pay his duty-visit!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

STUNNED, BUT NOT CRUSHED.

FIGHTING against the fear that, after all he had done to bring about a friendly meeting of relatives, his hopes were doomed to disappointment, Uncle Sam dashed at almost reckless speed along on his forlorn hope.

Believing as he did that he was working solely for the good of his master, the faithful negro took no count of toil and fatigue, but pressed on as rapidly as possible; and that would have discounted the pace of nearly any other man in that section.

Although he had doubts enough to keep his face darkly gloomy, Uncle Sam never once suspected how his last hopes were fated to be crushed, for the time being at least.

Although they had kept a close watch, ever since hearing sounds in the blockaded tunnel which warned them their enemies were still trying to entrap them, neither master nor man had been able to catch sight or sound of the Pilkingtons, or of their evil tools.

England and Inkstone had performed their duty as spies to perfection, and though he had passed within an easy stone-throw of their covert, Uncle Sam had not so much as suspected how closely that hill refuge was invested.

His brain busy with arguments through which he might hope to win Mayo Galloway into receding from the position he had so obstinately taken up the night last past, Uncle Sam saw nothing to alarm him, until he slackened his pace to give the familiar signal which was to prepare the hermit refugee for his return.

Then he stopped short, one hand flying up to his heated brows as he stared aghast.

For, there at the base of the cliff lay the rope and the hide bag, by means of which the ascent and descent was usually made, now in a tangled heap!

"Master! God of Heaven!" gasped the poor fellow, reeling as he tried to spring forward, to solve his sickening doubts.

The blood-red blur which spread over his eyes prevented him from at once realizing how widely astray his fancy had led him; for his first thought was that, having occasion to descend from the refuge, his old master had fallen, to meet his death on those ugly rocks!

Stunned, almost sightless, weak and failing, Uncle Sam managed to reach that point, then sunk down in a shivering heap as his trembling hands sought to tell him what his blinded eyes refused.

That blind, sightless groping failed to meet the ghastly relic he feared to find, and as his

sight began to clear, Uncle Sam quickly found a respite from those killing fears. Only a respite, for how could that abandoned rigging be interpreted save as a great misfortune?

"Those devils! They've found him at last! Master! Master Mayol for love of Heaven, master, call back to your poor nigger!"

Only the echoes of his own hoarse tones came back, from the rocks rising irregularly here and there, and then, with a choking groan, the sorely over-tasked fellow fairly broke down, his head sinking into his hands as they hung between his knees.

Those few moments were bitterer far than death, but, fortunately, they did not last long. With an effort, such as few men so heavily weighted could have shown, Uncle Sam rallied, springing to his feet with a deep, subdued roar—lion-like and full of vengeance.

Not a word passed his lips; no need for them, with such actions, such looks!

His face turned toward the heavens, even as his tightly-clinched hands rose above his head. His great chest rose and fell with hot, hard pantings. His eyes, so recently dimmed with tears of bitter agony, now glowed like black diamonds.

It was a silent oath of vengeance, but woe unto those who had done this evil deed!

Knotting one end of that long, pliant rope to his belt, Uncle Sam straightened out the tangled coils, then began slowly but surely climbing up the face of that nearly perpendicular rock.

Fritz England had asserted his belief that a nimble foot, a strong hand and a steady head, could possibly accomplish that very feat, and now, from his unhesitating manner of proceeding, Uncle Sam proved that this was not his first attempt in that direction.

To one of his massive build, the feat seemed impossible, yet he made remarkably rapid progress, finding ample foothold where one, on the level below, could have taken oath even a cat could not have found resting-place for a single foot. And then, with a dexterous swing, he landed safely on the masked ledge, from whence that rope and tackle was manipulated in case of need.

"Master!" he called forth, though not daring to expect an answer in those loved tones; nor did any such come.

He pressed into the rock-chamber, to find it deserted. And only the mocking echoes of his own voice made reply to his calls.

With his last frail hope banished, Uncle Sam began drawing up the rope and tackle, coiling all away in its accustomed place. He could not say when, if ever, its services would again be required, but if that time should come, there must be no lack through his hasty actions.

He even took time to search that chamber for a possible note or word of explanation from his master. He felt morally convinced that Mayo Galloway had been entrapped by his terrible foes, but—as before—he would make all sure as he went along.

Finding nothing of the sort, Uncle Sam hurriedly secured a small supply of provisions, stowing them away on his person. He went to a cunning hiding-place which he had shaped for his master, and from it drew forth the will which he had, vainly at first, urged Mayo Galloway to sign.

He had prevailed, after hearing the joyous tidings of the death of both Jaffray Pilkington and Ozias Popp, to his master. There was the weak, shivering signature, and below it was his, boldly formed. A third was needed, according to strict legal demands, but with that instrument safely fastened inside his shirt, Uncle Sam felt better armed for the deadly struggle which he knew must soon come to pass.

He lingered barely long enough for a final glance around, making sure there was nothing more for him to do in that quarter, for the present, at least. Then he left the rock-chamber, and began his perilous descent of the cliff.

This feat was accomplished in safety, though it was far more trying to the nerves, if not to the muscles, than mounting the rock had been. And then, straining his eyes for some signs by which he could more clearly comprehend just what had happened, Uncle Sam slowly quartered the ground near the spot where he had found the tackle.

"There's no blood! He was captured, not killed! They would not take his life, for the great Tontino—God's curse is upon it all!"

All this had consumed a great deal of time, though so briefly narrated, and although the hour named by Digby Fairclough as the extreme limit of his waiting at the rendezvous for the coming of Mayo Galloway, his real or pretended uncle, was now near at hand, Uncle Sam, after a vain search for a positive clew, unhesitatingly struck out for that spot, muttering grimly:

"If he believes, he may help; if he doubts—I can leave him my curse, and work alone!"

Although his spirit was strong as ever, the black began to show signs of fatigue, now that he no longer had glad hope to sustain him. It was far past the appointed hour, when he came in sight of the rendezvous, so he was not greatly disappointed at failing to catch a sight of the young New Yorker.

"It's only following him to town, and— Holy mother!"

Uncle Sam started back under that first shock, but quickly rallying, he sprang forward to more closely examine those tell-tale spots; red, showing terribly clear against those sun-bleached stones; spots which he could not for a moment doubt were of blood!

He touched finger-tip to one spot which lay in a little depression in one of those stones. It slipped under his pressure, and as the dry skin lifted with his hand, the spot beneath showed damp to the eye.

"Fresh! shed since I was here, but—whose was it?"

The answer seemed only too evident, and rising to his feet, the giant negro once more gave that deep, roaring cry; a sound to carry terror to the hearts of his boldest enemies, had they been within reach of his voice.

"Old master—young master!" he panted, hoarsely. "Not content with one, they've taken both! Who?"

The answer came almost as soon as that fierce question crossed his parched lips.

"Who but those cursed Pilkingtons! Hell's blackest curses cover them a million miles deep! But not until I've worked my will upon them both! Not until I've had vengeance for all!"

He sunk down upon a rock, bowing his aching head upon his clasped hands. He spent only a few moments in busy thought, for time was precious, and he had already determined in which quarter his blows for revenge must fall.

Jaffray Pilkington had paid the last penalty for his many crimes, but he had left a son, a daughter. Unto them this double outrage was surely owing! To their hearts he must send his return blows.

Then a thought flashed across his brain that sent him to his feet with another harsh cry.

"The young lady—is she safe?"

Since the enemy had struck at two, would they permit the third to escape them? Had they not already made their power felt in that quarter, as well?

"I must go—to Break-neck!" hoarsely cried the black fellow, starting away from those ominous signs. "I may yet be in time to save Miss Marcia's girl—but if not—those devils shall pay for it all!"

Almost any other man would have fallen in his tracks, exhausted, if not slain outright by such protracted and enormous exertions, but the remarkable black sprung away almost as rapidly as he had while racing to fetch his master to the rendezvous.

He knew the full value of time, while dealing with such remorseless enemies, and yet he veered slightly from the most direct course to the mining-town. He knew that, wonderful though it was, his powers were beginning to weaken, and that he could make better time in the end, by striking the smoother trail, along which Steel Surry had been journeying when he met with the mishap described in the earlier part of this record.

He struck this trail just as the shades of night were beginning to darken into something more than dusk, but with only the one immediate end in view, the faithful fellow raced on, to meet yet another balk!

For, without sound or warning, at least two shots flashed out from cover, close at hand, and with a choking cry, the negro giant flung both hands up to his head, then pitched forward, like one death-smitten!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SIR STEEL TAKES A HAND.

"WHOOHAY! He's our meat, and downed him first clatter!"

So yelled Tom Inkstone, and never for an instant doubting the perfect success of the trap which he, in company with his fellow spy, Fritz England, had so hastily arranged, he broke cover and rushed forward to reap the benefit of their triumph.

Better for him had he thought of the old adage, and made haste less heedlessly, for, rallying after a single breath's duration of that sickening paralysis which cripples the body while leaving the brain as clear and active as ever, Uncle Sam sprang to his feet with a hoarse, inarticulate roar of angry vengeance.

"Look out fer the devil!" screamed the bony spy.

"Kill him, or he'll—" spluttered Tom Inkstone, but he never completed that sentence.

Those shots had been fired from a covert close alongside the trail, and the two knaves had only waited until the giant negro had passed them by a few yards. Their first rush carried them halfway to their intended victim, and as he gained his feet, to catch sight of his dastardly assailants, Uncle Sam covered the remaining space with a single leap.

"Devil you first!" he roared, as his great paws closed upon Tom Inkstone, just as that fellow fired another shot, so near to hand that its flash scorched the negro's shirt. "You first, then your master!"

With the failure of that shot to drop his herculean adversary, the spy's last hope fled. In that tremendous grip he was no more than an infant, and recalling all that had passed of late, Uncle Sam had no room left for thought of mercy.

Fritz England, never so agile as when bodily danger menaced, dodged aside, giving a rat-like squeal of terror as he saw the supposed dead man rise in his wrath. He saw his mate swallowed up in that mighty grasp, and possibly might have plucked up courage enough from that peril to make use of his weapons, only for another startling fact: a loud, ringing cheer came through the deepening dusk, and then he caught the sound of swiftly-beating hoof-strokes, drawing nearer.

"Here we come, head up and tail over the dasher!" shouted the Sport from Sunrise, rounding the bend in the trail at full speed, one hand armed, the other managing the horse which had taken the place of luckless Dandy Doc. "Who says rats? Who says—Hello, there, fellows!"

He jerked up his nag, at the same time taking a flying leap from the saddle, striking the trail with all the elasticity of a cat.

Fritz England had sought safety in flight, and was now lost to view among the rocks. Uncle Sam held Tom Inkstone in his mighty grasp, but that spy would never more plan or spring a trap.

"The other devil—don't let him get away!" hoarsely cried the black Hercules, as his grip relaxed, letting Inkstone fall limply to the trail.

"White devil, of course, since I see the black one!" retorted the sport, his ready pistol rising to a level. "I reckon I'll take you in, old man, just for luck!"

Remembering his own experience at those hands, it was by no means difficult for Sir Steel to see in this incident another outrage of pretty much the same caliber, and when his gun came down upon the black fellow, it meant sober business.

If Uncle Sam had made a single rash movement, just then, another tragedy almost surely would have taken place; but he read that face and that voice aright, and stood motionless while saying:

"You're helping wrong in place of right, young master. This devil and mate, shot at me from cover. I carry their mark on my head, as you can see by looking, and my guns are clean."

"So you say, Uncle Sam, but—I've heard you chatter before."

"Come and see, but quick!" with a growing fierceness in his tones. "They've trapped my master, they've snared young Fairclough, and—"

"What? You surely don't mean—"

"That I was running my best in hopes of saving Miss Fairclough from sharing the same fate, when—"

If Uncle Sam had really been an enemy, he would have found an easy victim just then, for Steel Surry dropped his guard, forgetting all else in the awful fears which those few words awakened.

"Tell me—what do you mean? What danger can menace her? Tell me, or I'll break you clean in two!"

"My master—you saw him—is trapped, and so is young Fairclough, sir," Uncle Sam hurriedly explained. "I believe the Pilkingtons did it all, but don't stop! Mount, and ride hot-foot to Break-neck, to warn his sister that—you know her?"

"One word: is Miss Enid Fairclough in danger?" sharply demanded Sir Steel, his fingers tightening almost like a vise.

"She is, unless those devils have already trapped her."

With a single leap the Sport from Sunrise was in the saddle, his spurs already drinking blood. And without naying the slightest heed to the words which Uncle Sam shouted after him, he raced along that rocky trail, heading for Break-neck, room for only one thought in his brain just then: to save the maiden whom he loved better far than all the world beside.

In his haste he had not waited to learn just what was the nature of the peril menacing his loved one, and though Uncle Sam had plainly named the Pilkingtons, in those first few minutes of mad haste, Surry did not give them a single thought.

Rather oddly, after having been given such good cause for suspecting Uncle Sam and his master to be "no better than they ought," to put it mildly, Sir Steel never once thought of questioning the perfect truth of this report, until long after he had vanished from sight of the negro.

"Was I fooled?" he reflected, at length, when nearly within sight of the mining-town, toward which he was even yet furiously racing. "Did he give me guff, to bluff me off? Was he playing road-agent, on his own hook, or—climb, ye cripple!" as his wet spurs once more raked those panting flanks.

Why query, when a few minutes more would solve all doubts?

"If she's safe—if Fairclough is safe—then I'll know!"

Over and over he repeated those words, but he could extract very little consolation from them. Reason had naught to do with it: as by instinct he felt that great peril had fallen upon the girl he loved so passionately. And he away from her side!

"Why did I go? Why let that hot-headed young fool bluff me off?" he asked himself, then—

plied his spurs with renewed cruelty as he could find no consoling answer to his own tormenting questions.

Once again Sir Steel made the passage of Break-neck Chute at full speed, giving no thought to his own danger, sparing not his poor horse. What was either, or both, in comparison to her safety or her peril?

The horse staggered, tripped, fell beneath its reckless rider when the level was fairly gained, but Sir Steel alighted safely on his feet, and with hardly a break in his action, dashed swiftly away through the shadows of night, as yet unrelieved by moonshine.

Twice he was bailed from the gloom by persons who fancied something of importance surely must have transpired, but he sent back no reply. He had not been recognized, thanks to the darkness, and hence he reached the Tip-top House without being followed closely enough for his destination to be discovered by those curious ones.

That run had lasted long enough for Sir Steel to fairly lay his course, and avoiding the office, where he knew more or less loungers were sure to be gathered, he passed around to the rear of the building, hoping too find Mother Nancy engaged in the kitchen.

Nor was he disappointed in this hope, and springing into view so abruptly that the good lady gave a startled scream, Surry panted:

"Miss Fairclough? Nothing has happened? She's here, safe?"

Mrs. Deakin had been too greatly startled to make immediate reply, but even before her tongue spoke, her changing countenance warned Sir Steel that all had not gone well.

"Speak, Mother Nancy!" he almost harshly demanded, gripping her arm with a force that left bruised reminders for many a day after. "Where is Enid—Miss Fairclough?"

"I just wish I knowed!" panted the landlady, half-hysterically.

"What? Surely you haven't let— She's in her room, isn't she?"

"I just wish she was—poor dear! I just wish—What'd you go sneak 'way, for, just when you'd ought'er been here to— Oh, dear!"

In his hot anxiety to learn just what had taken place, mingled with a single man's dread of a swoon or fit of hysterics, Sir Steel caught up a glass of water standing near, flinging the contents squarely into Mrs. Deakin's face.

It was heroic treatment, surely, yet he could scarcely have acted for the better, all things considered. It gave the landlady a shock, and at the same time roused her indignation just far enough to lend her the usual free use of the tongue.

She seemed to think that Surry was in great part to blame, if only for taking horse and going off on one of his long rides through the hills. Still, he was not long in gleaning all Mother Nancy knew concerning the matter; but that was not much, when simmered down.

She had chanced to hear Miss Fairclough running down the stairs, as if in great haste, and curiosity led her to investigate. She reached the front door in time to catch a passing look at them, as they went down street, but—

"Them, you say?" interrupted Sir Steel. "You mean her brother was with the lady?"

"No I don't, neither!" almost snapped Mother Nancy. "I did reckon 'twas him, first glimpse, but then I see'd my mistake. She wasn't with no brother, and that I'm sure of!"

"Who was it, then?" his face paling by the candlelight.

"A man, or somebody rigged out like a dude!"

"Who was it, then?" repeated Surry, his voice growing harsher. "What has been done? Have you set any one to hunting for the lady?"

"Law, no! why should I? She went of her own free will, as anybody could see with half an eye! Wasn't they walking arm in arm, just as though—"

"Stop! Not even you can throw out a slur against Miss Fairclough, Mother Nancy," that title helping tone down his stern reproof. "There has been foul work going on here! I'm sure she had no acquaintances in town, beyond her brother and myself. Yet—can't you help me out, woman? Can't you see that I'm suffering—help me, for God's sake!"

"I just wish I knowed how, dear heart!"

"What did he look like? How was he dressed? Which way did they turn? Anything—just give me a clew, and I'll do the rest!"

"Well, I did think—you know that Pilkington woman, sir?"

"I've seen her, yes. What do you mean by naming her?"

"I thought it looked like her, rigged out as a dude—so there!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HARD PILL COUNTS HIS CHICKENS.

"WAKE up, you grizzly old sinner!" cried Hardress Pilkington, as he rudely tore the muffler from about the head and face of Mayo Galloway. "How do you reckon you're feeling just about this hour of the day, anyway?"

"None the better for being cursed with the sight of your dastardly face, you cur!" boldly retorted the helplessly bound refugee, squarely encountering that malignant gaze.

Hard Pill drew back, rising erect, hands planted against his hips, as he fairly roared with laughter. Now that triumph, so long waited for, was fairly within his grasp, he could well afford to be jolly!

"You know you don't mean all that, my highly respected patriarch," he mocked, after quelling his risibles to a degree. "You know that it is a rare feast for your bleared eyes—my beautiful mug!"

"Not just now, though I can easily imagine surroundings which would make the sight of your face one of the sweetest, rarest pictures my fancy ever shaped!"

"And those surroundings, Mayo Galloway?"

"Should be the same that marked the last moments of your equally accursed father, dog! The rope, the noose, the—"

His fierce speech was cut short by Hard Pill lifting a foot and planting its broad sole fairly across his lips.

No trace of jollity lingered in that inflamed countenance, now! It was the face of a merciless fiend, and Mayo Galloway had by no means improved his condition by that reckless speech, much as he might have gratified his hatred for the instant.

For a brief space as that foot bore heavily upon his face, his very life was in peril, for, after his fashion, Hardress Pilkington had loved his father, and that shameful death had been a heavy blow to him.

"You devil's tongue!" he growled, lifting his foot and shaking it menacingly above that bruised face. "What's to hinder me mashing in your skull?"

"The Tontine, you bound!"

Hard Pill fell back, almost as though he had received a heavy blow full in the face. Mayo Galloway laughed mockingly as he watched the effect of his words.

A prisoner he might be, but he knew that, for the present at least, his life was in no danger at those evil hands.

The desperado quickly rallied at catching that sound of mockery. He could not afford to give his long-hunted enemy even so barren a victory over him, and from that moment his face was steeled against all such biting taunts.

"You speak of the Tontine, do you?" he asked, coming forward, to squat on his heels, his hairy fingers interlaced across his knees, his eyes glowering redly at his captive. "Good! I'd just as soon dilate upon that subject as another, for it's not yet time to put you to sleep—for all time!"

"As no one knows better than yourself!"

"According to your say-so, dear fellow! But stick to your own text, now you've selected it from so many others. The Tontine! Once the general heritage of an even score of lusty youths. Now—all mine!"

"You lie, Hard Pill! 'Tis all mine!"

"Since you are mine, don't that make it come true, Galloway? It's been a long and weary spell of waiting, with more downs than ups—"

"Your father found one of the 'ups,'" didn't he, dog of the devil?" the captive cried, plainly bent on enjoying himself as far as possible.

"Up a tree, you mean?" drawled Pilkington, actually forcing a smile to the surface. "Well, I believe you're right. Very obliging in the old gentleman, too. And he'd shut out the light of the only other surviving member of that glorious Tontine, remember! Few fathers would have been so considerate of their children's interests, I'm thinking!"

An expression of intense disgust and loathing crept into the haggard visage of the prisoner as he listened to this heartless speech. For the moment even his keen wits were deceived, and he believed this careless, drawling speech came from a basis of truth.

If so, his last weapon was taken away, and his lips locked in front of his tongue.

Hard Pill laughed mockingly as he saw this, and then proceeded to make the most of his long-sought victory.

"With Dad and old Popp out of the ring, you alone were left to carry that mountain of gold on your shoulders, Galloway; enough for a score—yet all yours."

"And all mine even now, you cur!" flashed the prisoner.

"Just now, I agree with you, dear man," his captor said, with that intensely disagreeable chuckle. "But I'm worried about your state of health, and mean to coax you into making your will, before—"

"I've already made it!"

"What! you've already—bah!"

"I've made my will. I've signed, and had it legally witnessed. I've placed it in trusty hands, with instructions to investigate if I fail to report at least once in each and every month!" declared Galloway, stretching the truth a little, but deeming it no particular sin to fight the devil with his own weapons.

Despite his resolve to the contrary, Hard Pill could not entirely avoid showing chagrin, if not actual alarm, in his face. But he covered it over as well as he could, sneeringly breaking forth:

"Is all that so, my fine schemer? Well, do you know just what that amounts to, if proven true?"

"To your utter failure, no less!"

"To my complete and very easy victory, rather! Why, you simple ass! This making a legal will is precisely what I caught you for! I expected to waste a week or two in pinching you, before I could win you over to my views, but now—you've signed your own death-warrant in signing that will, Mayo Galloway!"

If not in sober earnest, then Hardress Pilkington was a more finished actor than his face would indicate, and for a few moments, while listening, the helpless man felt his heart sink within his bosom.

Had he made a fatal mistake in giving Hard Pill that clew to the scheme concocted by Uncle Sam? It might be so, and then he determined to remedy the slip, if bold lying could bring that about.

"Bah! don't I know better than that, dog? Only through my fingers can you hope to even touch that fortune! And—need I say it?—I will die ten thousand deaths before giving you a single penny!"

"Why beg for a penny, when I can claim all? And that all! Just stop long enough to figure it up, Galloway!"

"Nearly fifty years ago, sixteen loving daddies, with twenty healthy sons, in all, put their wise heads together and gave for each hopeful son a valuable hostage to fortune! In other words, they chipped in one thousand dollars a head, placing the cash in trusty banks, there to be compounded at the end of each year, the whole amount to remain at interest until the Tontine should come to its natural end; in still plainer words, until all of the twenty had died, save one."

"Can you figure up the amount, Galloway? Twenty thousand dollars to start with, and all the interest—gods! it fairly takes away my breath!"

"It did take away your father's breath—aided by the noose of the hangman!" sneeringly cried the prisoner.

"And so lessened the sore temptation I was fighting against, good fellow. I could hardly have held out much longer, though a son hardly likes to take—but let that pass! I'm more interested in this will of yours, particularly as I know the parties to whom 'twill fall, at your death."

"You lie, dog!" began Galloway, only to be cut short as Hard Pill turned his head to call aloud:

"I say, you ducks out yonder! Step in here, will you?"

Fritz England and Tom Inkstone entered the cabin, saluting their employer, who curtly added:

"Go fetch in the young gentleman, will you, lads?"

As they crossed over to the rear of the room, Mayo Galloway twisted his head around sufficiently to note their actions. He saw them step through an opening in the wall, which he had not suspected until then, passing out of sight, though no gleam of daylight entered through that cunningly contrived aperture.

"Because it leads back to a mighty snug cache in the hill itself, you comprehend?" Hard Pill volunteered, his keen eyes readily interpreting the meaning of that look. "And now, dear friend, before my lads come back with their valuable burden, permit me to add: don't be too greatly shocked!"

"I've been at work for a long time, remember, and I'd surely have found big color in time. Still, your nigger has helped me along most remarkably, although I hardly reckon he meant it should pan out just that way. In other words—permit me to introduce uncle and nephew!"

For, just then, the two rascals came back to the room, bearing between them the bound form of Dieby Fairclough!

If Hard Pill calculated on wresting a complete triumph from his eldest enemy, he was fated to miss it. Galloway showed no signs of emotion as he gazed upon that face. It was as though he had not the slightest interest in the young gentleman.

"What! not a word of greeting?" ejaculated the desperado, in real or admirably counterfeited surprise. "Is this the proper way for heir and testator to meet?"

"I never laid eyes upon this gentleman before," coldly said Mayo Galloway, turning his eyes away, wholly unmoved. "He is nothing to me."

"But he is to me!" flashed Hard Pill, casting aside his feigned composure from that moment. "And when—"

He cut himself short, springing to his feet, with one hand mechanically dropping to a pistol-butt as he strode toward the partly closed door.

The rapid trampling of a horse's hoofs were heard, and more than half expecting to behold an enemy, the red-haired giant sprung to the front, flinging wide the door—to stop short as a clear call came to his ears:

"Steady, Hardress! None of your tricks on travelers, now!"

Hard Pill leaped outside as he recognized, not

only that voice, but that masculinely-clad figure just then dashing up to the cabin.

"You, Kate! What brings you so much ahead of time? Out with it, girl! What luck have you—"

"The best even you could wish for, old rocks! I've done my share of the work, and if you have—"

"Light, and see for yourself, my lady!" with an exultant laugh, as he held out his strong arms to receive that plump figure, giving it a bear-like hug before letting her feet touch the ground.

"My sister—you haven't harmed her?" gasped Digby, as she entered.

"No; but I've taken care of her, sweetness!" laughed Kate.

CHAPTER XXXV.

UNCLE SAM MAKES A POINT.

As Sir Steel dashed away so impetuously along the trail to Break-neck, Uncle Sam started in the same direction, only to stagger as a sudden blindness fell over him.

A choking cry escaped his lips, and as his dizzy reelings brought him into contact with the tall rocks at the right of the trail, his fingers failed to grip point or spur firmly enough to keep their owner from sinking in a heap at its base.

A sickening faintness was rapidly creeping over him, and it seemed as though his skull was splitting wide before that acute pain, for at least one of those ambushed shots had taken effect, and only for the darkness of his skin, the red blood might have been seen trickling down over his face.

And yet, that very bloodletting may have come opportunely. Without some such relief, that sorely over-tasked brain might well have given way altogether!

Uncle Sam did not lose his consciousness entirely. He could hear the dying-away echoes of Sir Steel's hard racing, and like an echo similar sounds came to his ears from nearly the opposite direction. An echo, but with a difference. And as those strokes grew louder, clearer, Uncle Sam rallied his wits and summoned his strength for action.

He might have been unable to explain the fact, but certain it is that he felt morally certain an enemy, not a friend, was coming. And as horse and rider forged into view, following the rude trail, the black Hercules sprang from cover and barred the way.

"What do you—Hal! you black devil!"

A pistol was jerked forth and fired, but swifter yet moved Uncle Sam, and his fierce grip on arm sent the lead astray, then that dapper figure was jerked from the saddle, to be wrapped in great arms so tightly that drawing or wielding another weapon was an impossibility.

"Devil!" gasped the captive, struggling with an energy deserving better results. "Don't—I'm a—woman!"

"You're a devil!" hoarsely growled Uncle Sam, as he twisted her to the ground, face downward, then held her arms powerless with one hand, a heavy knee pressing upon her back, his free hand drawing a knife, with which he slit her belt into strips suitable for securing her wrists.

All fatigue, all sickness was forgotten now, and when he had bound her arms securely, Uncle Sam lifted Kate Pilkington to her feet, glaring into her face with a harsh laugh, more terrible by far than the wildest of curses.

"Ay, my woman-man! you're a devil, but I know how to tame you!"

"I'll have your life for this, you black ruffian!" pantingly cried the woman, struggling to free herself from those hastily applied bonds; but failing in this, using her booted feet in hopes of winning clear far enough to make a desperate dash for friends and liberty.

Uncle Sam twisted her around, face from him, then thrust her forward from the trail into the rocks. The frightened horse had wheeled and fled into the darkness, but he gave it not a second thought. With such a precious prize as this, he could well afford to walk, even though he might have to carry another upon his shoulders.

Kate Pilkington seemed to yield, almost meekly, but it was only to win a better chance for making another fight for liberty. That came when they had passed but a few rods from the regular trail, but, as before, those mighty hands foiled her efforts, and then she lifted her voice in a wild, shrill scream for help!

"Music—sweet music!" mocked the negro, but closing one hand about her neck until the alarm was effectually smothered. "I could listen to your sweet piping all night, woman, only—Where's my master, ye she-devil?"

From mockery to menace, in a single breath. His hand seemed choking the very life out of her. His arm threatened to crush in her ribs. His eyes glowed like fire-balls, and his still even, strong white teeth, not only showed themselves, but clashed together like those of a famishing wolf with the scent of hot blood coming to its nostrils.

Enough to crush the spirit of almost any woman, but Kate Pilkington proved herself of no ordinary caliber. Uncle Sam gave her breath with which to answer, and her first audible gasp was a fierce defiance.

Too vicious for record here, it told the faithful servant how little he or his had to hope for from their bitter enemies, and without wasting more time just then in talk or recriminations, he cut a portion of her garb away, to shape it into a gag. He found some little difficulty in applying this, but he was not in a mood just then for standing on ceremony, and by dint of stern choking, he finally forced those locked jaws far enough apart to crowd the gag firmly into place.

This done, by which he knew he had provided against an untimely cry bringing other enemies down upon his back when least prepared to meet them, Uncle Sam swung his captive across his broad shoulders, then struck out through the hills at a rapid pace.

Feeling sure that he had gained one important point in the stern game which was being played against such heavy odds, the faithful black seemed to forget his fatigue, his wound, all save the necessity of winning a place of safety for this, his grand prize.

Still, Kate Pilkington was anything but a feather-weight, and the killing exertions which he had been obliged to undergo during the last few hours, were beginning to tell on the sable Hercules. Although at long intervals, he was forced to halt for rest, and at each one he put that question to his captive:

"She-devil, where is my master?"

Her tongue hampered, Kate Pilkington made her eyes answer, and that, too, was ever the same: vicious defiance and undying hatred!

At length the vicinity of the hill-refuge was reached, and aiding his captive in the darkness among the rocks, Uncle Sam stole forward to make sure none of that evil gang were lying in wait to kill or capture him.

He found the coast clear, and returning to Kate, he bore her still nearer the base of that cliff, where none could come to release her without first coming under his own eye and weapons.

Once more he scaled that seemingly impracticable rock, and swinging himself into the niche, he quickly arranged the tackle, then stepped into the skin bag, lowering himself swiftly to the level where he had left his prisoner.

Knowing that if enemies had really been on the watch, he would have been shot while climbing up or going down, Uncle Sam wasted no further thoughts in that quarter, but picking Kate Pilkington up, he forced her into the bag in a kneeling position, then, standing on the edges of the rude basket, his knees firmly gripping her shoulders, he slowly, carefully hauled upon the rope.

The tackle had never before been subjected to such a heavy strain, but knowing that life or death depended upon its perfectness, Uncle Sam had done careful and thorough work to begin with. Though the wheel around which the rope ran, creaked audibly, nothing gave way, and with a dexterous swing the doubly laden bag was safely landed upon the ledge of rock.

"Welcome home, lady!" the black giant said, in hoarse, exultant tones. "Welcome to the home you and yours tried so long and so hard to find! Now—I reckon, you'll wish you hadn't, before the end comes!"

Moving her back to those rude sleeping places, Uncle Sam struck a light, then bent gloatingly over his prisoner. Not for long. His knife flashed, but only to cut the string that held that gag in place.

Squatting on his heels in front of his captive, he waited with seeming patience for her to regain control of her vocal organs. That was not long. Kate Pilkington was not only a woman, but she was a thoroughly evil, thoroughly reckless woman, and in a very few moments more she was pouring forth a flood of curses, threats and vituperation upon the insolent black fellow who had dared lay his foul touch upon her person.

Stolid as an image carved from a block of ebony, Uncle Sam waited until her breath began to fail her, then he repeated that question:

"She-devil, where is my master?"

"Safe in the grip of those who know right well how to make even such a miserable knave of good use!" boldly declared the woman.

"You mean that Hard Pill has caught him, at last?"

"Yes! And Hard Pill, as you term him, will catch you, as well! He'll make you die ten thousand deaths for what—"

"When he catches me—yes!" for the first time betraying something of the fierce fires which were inwardly consuming him. "But, before he can do that, what of you? What will I be doing with you, she-devil?"

For once Kate Pilkington had no answer ready. That burning gaze said far more than those deep, harsh tones. And she began to realize how hopelessly she was in this black demon's power, in case he should see fit to make use of it.

"You begin to see, she-devil?" added Uncle Sam, reading her face as it changed against her will. "But you can't even begin to know what

fate holds in store for you, if my present plans fail. I mean to offer you as exchange for my master—"

"He'll never give him up!"

"He shall have his choice between his wife, and my master," said the negro, rising to his feet. "If I fail to save Mayo Galloway, then you die—ten thousand deaths, as you said, just now!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

FAVORED BY FORTUNE.

As Mother Nancy uttered those words, Sir Steel shrunk away, as if he had been stricken a heavy blow in the face. For a single breath the worthy landlady feared another of those strange spells, but almost as quickly the sport rallied.

"What gave you that impression?" he asked, forcing his voice to a degree of calmness. "What made you think of Kate Pilkington?"

"Because, I caught sight of her, once, riding a horse, and she was dressed out like a man—the hussy!"

That was enough for Sir Steel, just then. It recalled the warning words let drop by Uncle Sam, and without pausing for further speech, he left the kitchen and dashed off through the darkness.

Although he had had nothing to do with the Pilkingtons, who had not long honored Break-neck with their presence, he had seen both man and woman—brother and sister, as they were supposed to be, then. And, having seen them both, he knew where they lived, of course, with the neighborhood knowledge that comes to all who live in a small town.

Knowing this, Sir Steel cut no further time to waste, but hastened direct to the cabin so frequently alluded to. He could hardly have explained what good he hoped to win by this action; for, granting that Mrs. Deakin had been correct in her suspicions, and that Kate Pilkington had really been the "dude" with whom Enid Fairclough left the Tip-top House, surely she would not have kept so valuable a captive there?

For, by this time, Sir Steel had gained a tolerably accurate idea as to how matters stood. To gain that knowledge, he had ridden away from Break-neck not long after that sharp parting from Digby Fairclough, and when he came across Uncle Sam doing battle for his life in the northern trail, he was returning with the desired information, gathered from the lips of an old sport whom he had some little time before, heard drop a few hints concerning the Pilkingtons and a great Tontine.

Putting two and two together, it amounted to about this: Mayo Galloway was the sole survivor of the Tontine. Enid and Digby were his legal heirs. With all three in their grip, the Pilkingtons would hold a terrible power over them, one and all!

Much of this was flashing through Sir Steel's brain as he hastened across to the cabin, standing so conveniently alone by itself. Enough to make him resolve to show no mercy, if none had been shown!

"If she's really done this, I'll treat her according to the rig she's borrowed! I'll kill her, if I can't save my love by less!"

The cabin was dark, seemingly deserted, but that very quietude seemed to steady the nerves and clear the wits of the sport. If there had been a light burning, he would have gone with a rush, to carry matters with the high hand, but now—he took time to scout clear around the little building, as well as to take a look into the stable.

"Horses gone! So are they, almost surely! But—I can't trail by dark, so we'll go at it systematically."

Fairly satisfied that the cabin had been deserted by its inmates, either for the time being or for good, Sir Steel returned to the front, with the intention of bursting open the door.

He could not say how this entrance was to benefit him, but if his suspicions were founded on fact, might it not be possible that some written word or message had been left by Kate for others of the gang?

"It's worth trying for, and so—here goes!"

Turning the knob, to lessen the resistance, Sir Steel was about to dash shoulder against the door, when it swung open to his touch. It had not even been locked!

A seeming trifle, but quite enough to still further dash his hopes of finding aught of importance within those walls. Surely, if not entirely abandoned, Kate Pilkington would never have left the building so utterly undefended?

Sir Steel stood in the middle of the room, musing thus. For the moment he was feeling too sick at heart to do aught else, and most fortunate this turned out to be, too!

The heavy, yet rapid fall of human feet came to his ears, and as he made them out drawing closer to the cabin, a ray of hope came back to him, and tiptoeing to the side of the door, he held the knob, waiting.

He caught a whistle, panting, unsteady, as though he whose lips made it was very near the point of exhaustion. Then, as that step touched

the stone flag before the door, Sir Steel flung it wide, gripped that bony figure, jerking it inside, to kick the door close with a foot as he fell on top of his captive!

It was an easy victory, the fellow making hardly a struggle, gasping for mercy in the whining tones owned only by Fritz England; but Sir Steel was taking no chances just then, and kept his pitiless grip until the spy was completely disarmed.

"Make a sound, or try to kick, and I'll slit your throat like a ripe tomato!" the sport fiercely growled, keeping his knees upon his game while he felt for and lighted a match. "You, is it?"

"Don't hurt—I'll squeal, boss!" whined the cur, huskily.

By that passing light Sir Steel caught sight of an oil-lamp standing on a table at one side of the room, and dragging his captive across the floor, he struck another match, with which he quickly had the lamp shedding a bright light over all.

"Now, you hound!" he said, in his grimmest tones, drawing the knife he had taken from the spy, swiftly and deftly across his skinny throat, by way of additional warning. "Not a whimper loud enough to pass outside of this room, but answer what I ask, if you hope for life!"

"I'll squeal, boss!"

"Where's Kate Pilkington gone, then?"

"Fore Heaven, boss, I don't know!"

"Steady, Skinny! I'll slit that thrapple of yours if you lie!"

"It's true, boss! I was comin' to tell her the nigger had killed Tom Inkstone, an' was hot on the track, an' fer her to move the gal—"

"The girl? What do you know of her? Speak, you cur, or I'll—"

"Hyar—sullar—I hearn Miss Kate tell the boss whar she was hid, an' so I come to warn her best look out fer the nigger."

Sir Steel was so nearly stunned by that revelation that he could neither speak nor move, for a few moments. But when he could control himself, he forced Fritz England, at the point of his own knife, to hunt around until that cunningly hidden trap-door was found.

Then, with a stern threat of death in case he attempted to cry out, or to escape before the whole truth was known, Surry hastily bound the knave and rolled him into a corner, before going further.

Not a sound had come up through that dark opening, and it was with great fear and trembling that Sir Steel took the lamp in one hand, his knife in the other, then lowered himself into the dark, cool pit. To give vent to a choking cry an instant later.

The light dimly revealed a figure lying motionless on a heap of dry grass, at the further end of that rude cellar, and his first thought was that his coming had been too late to save life!

But the reaction came as quickly. With a feeble effort, the woman lifted her head, and as the light shone fairly upon the pale face of Enid Fairclough, Sir Steel gave a choking cry of joy most intense; for he caught the reflection of her scared eyes, and he knew that she was living!

His lips met a gag, instead of what they so eagerly sought, and the necessity for using keen steel, lent the sport a little of the coolness he just then stood in such sore need of.

Never mind the next few minutes.

At the end of that time, Enid Fairclough, once more free from gag and bonds, once more with the hue of perfect health in her face, was sitting in a chair in the room above, watching her rescuer from a fate which she had dreaded far worse than mere death, as he bound Fritz England in a more substantial fashion.

"Stop your whining, you cur!" the Sport from Sunrise was saying, while his fingers were nimbly at work. "I'll give you your miserable life, if you pay the full price. I'll leave you here for a few minutes, then I'll come back to ask you a few questions. Until then, try to make up your mind to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!"

"I will, boss! Don't—don't gag me!"

"Open your trap—so! Because, Fritz, if you give me even the ghost of a lie, I'll have you strung up by the heels to the tallest tree in Break-neck region, as bait for buzzards!"

Catching England by the bound heels, Sir Steel dragged him across the floor to the trap, lowering him head-foremost, then letting him drop, to settle down in a heap, with such comfort as he might find. Closing the door and putting out the lamp, he guided Enid to the outside, pausing as the door closed behind him, to press an ardent kiss upon her warm lips.

"From now, to eternity, my own! By right of conquest! You admit it, Enid, darling?" he murmured, gazing intently into her dark lustrous eyes as they met his, no longer timid, but full of a love equal to that which lent a luminous glow to his own.

"Yours—against all the world, Surry!"

That response merited just what it received, and urgent though he knew matters were, Sir Steel could not cut that trip to the hotel too terribly short! But, at length, he placed Enid in Mother Nancy's care, bidding that good woman cherish her as the very apple of her eye!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TURN OF THE TIDE.

"THEY'S nobody made a sign nor a sound, boss."

Hardress Pilkington gave a surly growl, his face betraying a growing uneasiness as he shielded his eyes with a curved palm, to gaze long and anxiously away in the general direction of Break-neck City.

The sun was just coming into sight over the rocky hills, and the red-headed giant had but now roused up from the sleep which had been unusually late in visiting his eyes, thanks to his "fun" of tormenting the luckless beings who had fallen into his merciless hands.

Long before this hour he had expected tidings from Kate, if not from the two fellows whom he sent forth to kill or capture Uncle Sam. The delay on the part of Tom Inkstone and Fritz England was nothing more than might have been expected, considering the nature of their game, but Kate—what could be detaining her?

She had ridden post-haste to the rendezvous, to learn how their schemes had prospered, fearing to bring her captive along, lest a failure on their part should bring failure to her.

Finding everything had gone well with Hard Pill, she delayed only a short time, then took saddle to ride to Break-neck, with orders from Pilkington to bring Enid Fairclough without delay, to be joined with her brother and their uncle.

Kate knew the lay of the ground well enough not to have found any trouble because of darkness. Then, too, she had the moon to help her over the worst part of the trail. Then—what had hindered?

Even as he asked himself this question, Hardress Pilkington caught his breath with a sharp gasp, leaning forward as though that would help the keenness of his vision. And at the same instant one of the two men on guard duty ejaculated:

"Somebody comin', boss! An' a right smart chance of 'em, too!"

He was right. Just coming into fair view from back of a rocky spur to the south, was a body of horsemen and footmen, mingling together. The rays of the morning sun were reflected back from arms, giving the little army quite a martial appearance.

Hard Pill snapped his teeth together, and then gave a vicious growl. As by instinct he divined the truth: Kate had fallen into trouble, and this armed incursion was the result!

"Back under cover, you curs!" he growled, as the guards plainly betrayed their doubts and fears. "Inside with you, and not a sound or a move until I give the word!"

He was master still, and the knaves obeyed, though their fear-blanching skins told how little they relished the prospect, now it had so radically changed for the worse.

Hard Pill lingered outside until he could no longer doubt the truth; until he recognized at the head of that body of armed men, not only Sir Steel, but several other influential citizens of Break-neck.

"Ye curs!" he rumbled, as he entered the cabin and closed the door between them and their enemies. "What can they do, so long as we keep our grip on those two ducks?" with a nod of his head toward the secret *cache* back of the shack.

Thus having put a little stiffening in the backbone of his two men, Hard Pill looked to the condition of his Winchester, then poked its muzzle through a loop-hole in the cabin's front, to call out:

"Steady, you ducks! Show cause, or I'll ask you why not!"

While the majority of that little army mechanically obeyed, so far as coming to a pause was concerned, Steel Surry gave his horse a touch of the spur sharp enough to send him forward, in the lead. Then, reining in, he cried out clearly:

"Game's up, Hardress Pilkington! Give up your prisoners while we're in the humor for making terms, or we'll kill every last one of your evil gang!"

"The deuce you say!" roared back the giant, from his loop-hole. "And who might you be, Mister Glib-tongue?"

"I might be your friend, Hard Pill, but I'm not. It's you and yours I'm talking about. Once more—turn up your hand, or—"

"I'll turn up your toes, puppy, if you give me any more of your slack! Look! There's a blue rock some twenty-odd feet this side of you. That marks my dead-line, and if a foot is lifted over that, I'll lay its owner out for buzzard bait!"

Unseen though the speaker was, each and every one of the party under lead of Sir Steel felt convinced his threat was made in deadly earnest. Each pair of eyes took note of the blue rock, and each eye traced that imaginary line running to the right and the left.

"Don't be a fool, Hardress Pilkington," sternly cried out Steel Surry, resolved to carry his point by peaceable means if possible. "You can't run, for we've got you surrounded. You can't fight, for there's only three of you, all told. You—"

"You lie, when you count, Chipper-chin!"

roared forth the giant desperado. "I'm a round score in my own boots, without counting the jolly lads I've got as backing. And then—do you count my game as nothing at all?"

"I count it as played out, Hard Pill! And to prove it, just open yours ears for a bit. Uncle Sam killed Tom Inkstone, when he and Fritz England shot at and then jumped the big fellow from cover. Fritz ran away, but I bagged him at your house in town, where he had hastened to warn Kate to flee with her captive, Miss Fairclough. He came too late to warn or save your sister, if sister she be, but just in time to show me where to look for the young lady, and to tell me this, among all your other secrets. Now—can't you begin to see it, Hard Pill?"

There came no immediate response from the cabin, and those few moments of suspense were very trying to Sir Steel, strong though his nerves were. Unless Fritz England had lied—and their finding this cabin, where none such was generally known to exist, seemed to prove him earnest in his confession—this desperate schemer held both Mayo Galloway and Digby Fairclough in his grip. What would he do to them, as an offset to this blunt statement of facts?

"Look yonder!" suddenly ejaculated one of the party, pointing to the right, in which direction now came into fair view a mounted shape.

Not figure: for the red rays of the morning sun blended into one, at least two forms, riding at a reckless pace toward either the cabin or that party of rescuers.

For a brief space all was doubt, so far as the latter party were concerned, for that shape was now almost in a line with the sun, and no details could be made out; but from the cabin there came a terrible roar of mad hatred and lust for revenge, which helped Sir Steel reach a correct conclusion.

"Uncle Sam, for a ducat!"

And Uncle Sam it was, riding the same horse which had carried Kate Pilkington to the scene of Tom Inkstone's death, the evening before. The animal was in a complete lather, so desperately had it been ridden; not alone by the black Hercules, for in his arms lay the figure of Kate, of Hardress Pilkington's wife, bound and helpless.

"My master! Give me up my master, ye devils!" roared the negro, as he jerked up the panting animal, leaping to the ground with the woman in his arms, a flashing blade held quivering above her heart.

"Hold!" cried Hard Pill, from the cabin, where he was vainly trying to secure a certain aim upon that giant form, but holding his hand lest he slay, where he most longed to save.

"Harm her, and I'll—"

"Throw up your hand, then, Pilkington!" cried Sir Steel, quickly, as he sprung forward, to stand upon the blue rock which had been named as the dead line. "Give up Galloway and Fairclough, and you can have the woman, as exchange!"

Uncle Sam stood silent, his words taken from him by that more nimble tongue. His knife almost touched that panting bosom, and all who saw him then, knew that even instant death could not keep him from sending that blade home to the very hilt.

"If I give up my prisoners, swear that Kate and I may go free?"

"I say that your lives shall be spared," more coldly said Surry. "I can't promise more than that, but so much I will pledge. Only—be mighty sudden about it, old fellow! Our colored friend is not in the most patient mood imaginable, as you can see for yourself."

"Master! Give me my master, safe and sound, or—death to her!"

"Choke that black devil off, then, and I'll give 'em up!" savagely growled Pilkington.

"You swear to save our lives, though?"

"Open your door, and let the two gentlemen walk forth, on their own legs, as proof that you have not harmed them, to count," said Sir Steel, at the same time moving toward Uncle Sam, muttering: "Don't harm her, man unless Hard Pill is playing us dirt! If he should try anything like that—"

"I'll cut her heart out, and eat it before his own eyes!"

Strong-nerved though he was, Surry shivered a bit as he heard that fierce sentence. And, as he gazed into that stern-set face, he knew that the black fellow meant every iota of it, too!

A few moments later the cabin door swung open, and, leaning an arm across the shoulders of Digby Fairclough, Mayo Galloway emerged, to be greeted by the rescuing party with a hearty cheer, in which the voice of Steel Surry was not lacking, be sure!

But he did not advance to meet them. He caught in his arms the bound form of Kate Pilkington, dropped by Uncle Sam, as the faithful negro bounded forward to greet his beloved master!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE END OF THE GREAT TONTINE.

UNDER cover of that glad meeting, Hardress Pilkington left the cabin which was no longer worth defending, and was met mid-way by Sir

Steel, whose knife had cut the bonds that confined the ankles of the woman.

"You've got your men, sir, and now—we can go, of course?" sulkily asked the desperado, as one arm passed around the waist of his wife.

"I said your lives should be spared, and I'll keep my word, unless you forfeit them by your own bull-headedness," was the cold retort. "When the law clears you, all right! Until then, you'll take matters as easy as you know how."

Doubtless, he would have said more, if not taken precautions which might have spared what followed, only Digby Fairclough called him by name, and Sir Steel sprung forward to meet that young gentleman half-way. Why not? He was her brother!

All about was confusion for the time being, and none of the victorious party saw what Hard Pill was doing, until too late to check that reckless attempt for liberty, as well as for life.

"That black devil will have blood to drink, husband!" Kate Pilkington huskily whispered. "Cut my arms free, and then—there's the horse, near enough!"

It was a crazy action, under the circumstances. The horse was jaded from that long, rough, forced race. Doubly laden once more, how could it be expected to win clear?

But Hardress Pilkington was driven almost mad by defeat, just when he fancied his great game was fairly won, and he felt that his only chance for retrieving that disaster lay in escape, to prepare another blow. And so, cutting Kate free, he sprung upon the horse, swinging her up before him, then dashed away at break-neck speed!

The alarm was instant, and some one from the crowd yelled forth:

"Shoot the horse!"

A rattling, irregular volley rung forth, and the fugitives went down in a heap. Horse and woman lay still, but the red-haired giant staggered to his feet, pistol in hand, firing shot after shot at his enemies. Until—a dozen reports came from the other side, and Hardress Pilkington went down, never to rise again of his own accord.

He fell across the body of his wife. Body, for life had fled when an examination was made. In falling, she had struck upon her head, the added weight of her husband's body causing her neck to break.

Fierce and relentless as Uncle Sam had been toward that wayward woman, when he felt that only through her could he hope to rescue his beloved master, his black hands were the ones which prepared Kate Pilkington for burial, his lips the ones to mutter a brief prayer over that grave, and in his eyes stood a moisture that told he had forgotten the criminal in the woman.

"Maybe she wouldn't have been so bad only for him!" he muttered, as he cast a glance toward that red-haired desperado. "Maybe if she had been an honest man's wife—But it all rests with the Good Father, now!"

Although the confession made by Fritz England had settled in Sir Steel's mind the exact relationship of these two unfortunates, he caused separate graves to be dug. Even he could not bear to place that still beautiful woman in the arms of such an unmitigated rascal as Hard Pill had proven himself.

When this double burial was completed, there was nothing more to delay the rescued and rescuers, for the two fellows who had acted as guards for Hard Pill, had taken advantage of the confusion to steal away into the hills, making their escape good before their absence was noted.

One of the couple was Johnny Bowles, who had played such an important part in the capture of Digby Fairclough, and a few words from that young gentleman readily cleared away the mystery surrounding the drops of blood on the rocks at the rendezvous, which had given Uncle Sam such a disagreeable shock.

While struggling with Bowles, Fairclough had contrived to get his pistol out, firing a single shot, before help came to his adversary. A flesh wound only had been inflicted, and Johnny Bowles was far from disabled by it, as his nimble flight the next day gave ample evidence.

Neither he nor his mate were again seen in or around Break-neck, but they doubtless met with their just dues in the course of time.

Sir Steel did not accompany that joyous party back to town. Without a word of parting, or of excuse, he mounted his horse and rode rapidly away, soon to be lost sight of.

Digby Fairclough frowned a bit as he noted this flight, and yet, he was not exactly sorry that such should be the case. He wanted time for thought and sober reflection. He knew that Sir Steel had led the rescuing party, but—could he ever even like the fellow?

But, if Sir Steel fled, he had left one stout advocate behind, in the person of Alfred Kindred. And, ere long, that worthy gentleman was giving both Digby Fairclough and Mayo Galloway a detailed account of how the Sport from Sunrise had solved the whole puzzle: of how he captured Fritz England, rescued Miss

Fairclough, forced a full confession from the lips of the bony spy, raised a rescuing force, then spurred them on through the night, to end the bitter game for the great Tontine!

"You're worse than an idiot if you still hold a grudge against the gentleman, sir!" grimly decided Mayo Galloway, after hearing this tale.

"But—unless he can clear up those ugly rumors which first caused our quarrel, sir, I'll hold to my belief that he's totally unfit for the acquaintance of any lady—so there!"

Mayo Galloway turned his face aside, for there was a half-smile on his thin face, a whole smile in his still bright eyes. He felt proud of this newly-found nephew, for he surely was plucky enough!

"And yet—he knows I'm the sole owner of the Tontine money, you say, Sam?" he whispered to his faithful servant and friend.

"He knows it all, master."

"Then—confound me if I'm not glad you sent for him, boy!"

Still, the old gentleman saw fit to both look and act as though displeased with young Fairclough, and no further speech passed between them until after Break-neck was reached.

There they were given an ovation, for, as the only sure method of ridding himself of their eager questions, Sir Steel had told them the party were returning in complete triumph.

He, himself, had gone straight to the Tip-top House, where Mother Nancy was on the lookout for his coming. She looked once into his eyes to read the truth, and seeing it there, in all its gladness, she gave him an enthusiastic hug, then pushed him toward the little parlor, at the same time whispering:

"She's in there—waiting for you! Be a man, now! Don't give her a chance to say no, but—say yes for her, you goose!"

And Sir Steel surely must have acted upon that hint, judging from the happy faces with which the young couple met the select party which Mother Nancy—after a few particularly loud coughs—ushered into that room, some little time later.

"For my sake, dear brother!" Enid murmured, as her arms wound about the neck of young Fairclough. "He saved my life—more than life! He rescued you, and—I love him, oh! so very dearly!"

And Sir Steel whispered to the same young gentleman:

"Give me a chance to clear my record, Fairclough. Before God and man, I've never been guilty of an action which could unfit me for winning and wearing her best love!"

And so it proved, in the end. Idle rumor, helped along by malicious tongues, had sowed the seeds of slander, and hot temper on both sides had hindered a perfect understanding. Until now! For, when that interview was over, Digby Fairclough himself joined their hands, even as love had united them before.

It did not take much longer for uncle to reach an amicable understanding with nephew and niece, and when the party left Break-neck forever, it was pretty generally understood that their home, even as their fortunes, were to be as one.

Mayo Galloway lived long enough to settle up the Great Tontine, and to see his niece wedded to Steel Surry, with Digby in a fair way to take unto himself a charming young wife.

Uncle Sam did not long survive his beloved master, and the two, man and master, now lie side by side, with one monument to record their names.

THE END.

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